
ARKHAM HOUSE FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION





THE PRINCESS OF ALL LANDS

Russell Kirk



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*To Monica Rachel Kirk
my eldest daughter
who styles herself
The Princess of All Lands*

PROLOGUE



TIME WAS, not long ago, when most folk professed their incredulity at any ghostly relation. But nowadays people seem eager to believe in even the most unlikely revenant. My uncanny tales in this present collection, though fanciful, also are true: true in the sense that at the heart of each of them lies some core of real experience (mine, or that of friends), and truer in the sense that these stories may touch upon the darkness or the light in souls.

One of my characters has haunted me, much as Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* intruded themselves upon that playwright's imagination. He is Manfred Arcane, presumably remembered by some of my readers as the picaresque hero of my exercise in black comedy, *A Creature of the Twilight*. Out of Africa come all things strange, we are told; and so Manfred emerges again from his African twilight to point a moral and adorn a tale, "The Last God's Dream." He insisted upon returning in the flesh, and I had not the heart to say him nay.

Another face twice emerging is Ralph Bain's. You find him in the

first story of this collection, and in the last; you may have seen him on television, in one of the late Rod Serling's productions. His end in "Sorworth Place," though heroic, was so nasty that some readers reproach me for injustice: at bottom, Bain was a decent chap who deserved better of the dominations and the powers. Be comforted: I have not resurrected Bain precisely, yet I have conferred upon him something better than resuscitation merely—immortality.

The three concluding yarns in this book—"Balgrummo's Hell," "There's a Long, Long Trail a-Winding," and "Saviourgate"—though written at different times and in different lands, form a trilogy with theological or transcendental implications. These are visions of the Inferno, of Purgatory, of Paradise. As Dante wrote to Can Grande della Scala, in *The Divine Comedy* there lie both a literal meaning and an allegorical meaning. So it is, in their small way, with the episodes of my Dantesque trilogy.

Any resemblance of this book's characters to actual persons, living or dead, is not coincidental. My lovely young wife may find herself here, or my stalwart old hired man—though translated by a sea change into something new and strange. Still quick or stone-cold dead, every one of my canny or uncanny creatures has known the trammels of the flesh.

Have I ever seen a ghost? Why, I *am* one, and so are you—a *geist*, a spirit, in a mortal envelope. Why did I write these sepulchral fantasies? Why, partly to remind you and myself that we are spirits in prison; and mainly in the hope of discomfiting an old man on a winter's night, or a girl in the bloom of her youth. I have dwelt in haunted houses, and I have prepared a chamber for you. If I conjure up in you a dreadful joy, like that of a small boy on a secret stair, my malice will be satisfied.

RUSSELL KIRK

Piety Hill
Mecosta, Michigan

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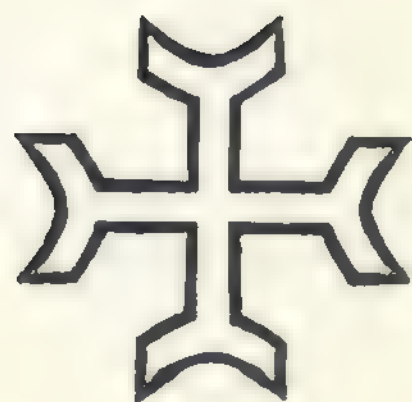
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SORWORTH PLACE



But the age of chivalry is gone. . . . The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone. It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honor, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.

EDMUND BURKE,
REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

IN DEFIANCE OF a faint ancient charm that perfumes its name, Sorworth today is a dirty and dreary little town, fouled by the colliery since the pit was sunk and a blot of hideous industrial workers' houses began to spread about it. The lanes are half-derelict, now that the pit approaches exhaustion. At a turn of the High Street, or down close off the Back Vennel, some fragments of old Scots masonry stand yet amidst a welter of hoardings and "fish restaurants" and corrugated iron roofing.

To damp Sorworth, of all places, Mr. Ralph Bain, M.C., had contrived to drift at the end of a month of purposeless nights in "family and commercial" hotels or bare village taverns across three counties. Drinks with strangers in one village, listless games of cards in the next town, inconsequential talks on buses or trains, dull glimpses of a pleasant wood there, an old church here: thus February had run out, and the next little pension-cheque would be forwarded to him at Sorworth, which spot he had chosen at random as his address for the first few days of March.

Bain lounged by the door of the King's Arms in his old tweeds

(with the cigarette-burns neatly darned) and felt the crack in his skull more vexatious than usual, and shifted his long legs languidly. Sorworth had nothing to show him. But what place had? He lit a cigarette, though he already had smoked three more this morning than he once resolved to allow himself out of the indispensable pension-cheque.

At that moment, a girl came out of a provision shop across the square, walking obliquely past the market-cross in the direction of the King's Arms; and Bain, one hand cupped to shelter his match, his face inclined slightly downward, noticed the remarkable grace of her little feet. He glanced lazily up; then he threw away his match, let his cigarette go unlit, and instinctively straightened. He had not seen this lady before, but in that second it passed through his mind, whimsically, "Perhaps she's what drew me to Sorworth."

Surely a man might travel a great way without meeting such a face as hers—pale, very pale, with lips a glowing natural red, and black hair gathered with taste at the back of her head into a heavy roll that rested upon her firm shoulders. Her chin, too, was delicately firm. She carried herself with a dignity that seems to be dying from modern life, looking straight ahead, as if in some reverie that walled her away from the grossness of Sorworth—yet not (Bain judged from her mouth) a reverie wholly pleasant. Among the mill girls and shop-assistants and bedraggled housewives in Sorworth, there was none anything like her; and few anywhere else. As she passed by the King's Arms, she seemed to notice Bain; their eyes met, briefly; then she lowered her lashes, unsmiling, and was gone up the Vennel.

"Och, she's a bonnie one, Mrs. Lurlin." Happening to come to the door as the girl passed by, old MacLeod, who kept the King's Arms, had followed Bain's long look. "There wullna be her like for aye, Mr. Bain—not at auld Sorworth Place." MacLeod shook his head portentously. In his youth he had been a gardener at some house of Lord Bute's, and he continued to hold the county families in profound respect, muttering sourly about Communists among the miners who drank in his bar.

"She's young to have the care of a big house," said Bain, relapsed into lethargy, and lighting his cigarette at last.

"Aye, and wee tae be widowed, sir. Noo the hoose—she canna hope tae keep it in the auld way, ye ken. Twa maids, and they carlines fu' o' girnings, sir: sma' comfort in a cauld hoose that's na sae canny, when a's said. It wull be rack and ruin, forbye, wi' half the braw hooses in the county." And MacLeod proceeded to expatiate on his favorite topics, the decay of old families and the follies of socialism.

"A widow?" put in Bain, lifting his heavy eyelids a bit. "She couldn't have been married a great while. What was this Lurlin like?"

"Be wha' he was, sir, the gentleman's dead, dead the year noo, Mr. Bain; and sma' gude claverin' o' men in the grave." That said, MacLeod turned back into his pub; but Bain, surprised at this reticence in a publican who ordinarily manifested a full share of Scottish censoriousness, followed him.

"He didn't die in the war?" inquired Bain.

"Na, na," said MacLeod, thus brought to bay; and, presently, "The drink, sir, the drink; that, and mair. Dinna mistake me, Mr. Bain. The Lurlins were braw auld blude; aye, but this Mr. Alastair Lurlin, he wasna o' the proper line, ye ken—na mair than a cousin. Mr. Hamish Lurlin, the auld laird, died seven years syne, and his twa sons were shot in Libya, first Alexander, then Hew. A' three death duties maun be paid, and the cousin comes tae wha's left. Last year, this Mr. Alastair dies: mair duties. Weel, Mrs. Lurlin keeps the hoose, and the policies, and a bit muir besides. Ninety thousand acres Lurlin o' Sorworth had, before the first war. Noo, but a hoose wha's unco cauld and clammy. Come awa' upstairs, sir, if ye be sae fascinated"—this a trifle spitefully—"and ye can see the auld Place frae the attic, if ye ha' gude een."

From a garret window of the King's Arms, they looked over the pantiles and corrugated iron roofs of the shabby town toward a serrated ridge some miles westward. On a flank of that hill, Bain just

could make out the grey shape of a big ancient house, wraithlike against the heather and gorse and bracken. "There'll be nane mair auld in the county," said MacLeod.

Bain went down alone to the parlor, sat some minutes before the doddering fire, and then addressed a note to Mrs. Lurlin, Sorworth Place. He was, he wrote truthfully enough, rather a dilettante in architecture; recently he had heard her house spoken of as remarkable; he would be glad to see it, if no inconvenience would be caused; and he would be in Sorworth the rest of the week. After some hesitation, he signed himself "M.C."; the Military Cross, after all, was one of his few remaining links with decent society, and he had the right to use it.

This letter posted, he went up to his room, brushed his old tweed suit, and glanced at himself in the mirror: the heavy eyes, the long and regular features weakened by lines of indecision, the defiant half-grin of bravado. He grimaced, and the suture in the back of his head—a memento of the shell fragment that had given him his pension—winced in sympathy. To escape from self-dislike, he went down to the bar, very like fleeing from the cell into the jail-yard.

Late the next afternoon an answer to his note came, written in a small round hand, which said that Mr. Bain would be shown about Sorworth Place if he should call on Thursday afternoon, and was signed "Ann Lurlin." The firm signature put Bain in mind of Mrs. Lurlin's elegant, pale look; and he spent most of the intervening evening and night and morning in a reverie of nearly forgotten faces, men he had alienated by his negligence or his improvidence, women he had found hollow or who had found him exasperating. None of these ever thought of him now, even when dreaming before the fire. And why should they?

Shortly past noon on Thursday, he walked along an empty road toward the ridge called Sorworth Law; the road became a lane between high and crumbling stone dykes; and then he was at the entrance to a neglected park on the side of a hill, its gates vanished, its gate-lodge empty, all its larger trees felled by some timber

merchant and the stumps left among heaps of dead leaves. Bain turned up the drive, and soon he could see, on the bare slope above, the massive stone shape of the Place of Sorworth.

Two square towers, at either end; and between them, extending also far to the rear, an immense block of building, in part ashlar, but mostly rubble. None of this, except a fine large window above the entrance, was later than the seventeenth century, and most was far older. An intricacy of crowstepped gables, turrets, dormers, and chimneys confused one's eyes when they roved upward. All in all, the Place was an admirable example of the Scots mansion-house unprettified by Balmoralism. A flight of heavy stone steps led up to the door, and on either side of the entrance projected a conical-capped turret, each supported at its base by an enormous corbel, curiously bevelled.

Some rods to the north could be made out to be what was left of a detached building, the roof of it gone — a chapel, perhaps. So far as Bain could see, there were only two entrances: the grand portal, and a small heavy door with a wrought-iron grille before it, that probably gave upon the kitchen. At the angles of either tower, musket-holes or arrow-loops, some blocked with mortar, the rest now closed with small panes of glass, flanked the entrance. The roofs were of ancient stone slabs.

Away at the back, the stout dykes of a walled garden closed the view, although Bain could hear the rushing of a burn somewhere in that direction. The lawn before the Place was unkempt, no better than pasture; here and there, in one of the towers and even in the main block, a broken pane glinted in the afternoon sun, and all about the strong grey house hung a suggestion of neglect and impoverishment that would have been more clearly manifest, doubtless, had not the mansion been so severe and rugged in its very character. The huge window of what must be the great hall broke the solidity of the façade just above the main door. Between this window and the doorway below, Bain perceived, as he climbed the steps, a terribly weathered coat of arms executed in a soft red sandstone, appended to it some pious inscription in venerably barbarous Scots-Latin

characters, most of them indecipherable. He could read only the two words which composed the last line: L-A-R-V-A R-E-S-U-R-G-A-T. *Larva Resurgat?* Why *larva*, rather than *spiritus*? The old lairds sometimes put things quaintly. He found no bell and so banged at the oaken door with a rusty knocker.

After an interval of leaden silence, the door was pulled ajar a bit, and a sour woman's face peeked round it. Bain asked to be announced. The fat maid let him into a little round room with naked stone walls, at the stairfoot, and locked the door again and then conducted him up a twisting stone stair in one of the entrance turrets—its treads scooped hollow by centuries of feet—to a gigantic vaulted chamber, well lighted: the hall. It was fitted with sixteenth-century panelling, painted with heraldic symbols and family crests. The air was cold, the yawning medieval fireplace quite empty; here and there a Jacobean carved cupboard, or the polished surface of a table, or a tapestried chair endeavored to apologize for the emptiness of the Place. None of the furniture seemed in good repair. Bain sat gingerly on a Chippendale piece, while the maid scurried off to some hidey-hole in this labyrinth of a house.

After three or four minutes, Mrs. Lurlin came down to him, emerging from behind a door concealed by a hanging. A faint smile hovered on her fine lips, her eyes met his composedly, and Bain thought her most beautiful, in an antique fashion. "I'll show you the curiosities of this draughty place, Mr. Bain," she said, in a low voice with an agreeable suggestion of west-coast accent about it, "if you'll pledge yourself to ignore dust and damp. I've nothing left but the house and the policies and a bit of moor, you know—not even a home farm."

Bain hardly knew what he said in reply, for she unsettled him, as if he had been shaken awake. Then Mrs. Lurlin led him up disused stairs and down into vaulted cellars and through chambers with mouldering tapestries and Lord knows where else. Almost all these interminable rooms were empty.

"Most was gone before the Place became mine," said Mrs. Lurlin, without visible embarrassment, "but I had to sell what was left of the

furniture, except for a few sticks in the really necessary rooms. I suppose the wreckers will buy the house when I'm dead. You can sell an eighteenth-century house, just possibly, in spite of rates, but not a behemoth like this. I can't afford to live here; but I can't afford to go away, either. Do you have some great barn of this sort, Mr. Bain?"

"I haven't even a cottage," Bain told her, "or a stick of furniture." He thought her black eyes remarkably candid.

She took him up to the summit of one of the towers, where they stood in the wind and looked over the braes that parallel the den of Sorworth Water as it twists down to the sharp-toothed long skerries where it meets the sea. From this height they could see quite clearly the surf on the rocks, and, some distance south, smoke from the fishing village of Sorworthness. Sorworth Water was in spate. Just at the tower's foot, the den veered right up to the castle, so that a stone which Bain tossed over the rampart bounced down a steep slope into the roaring burn. In the rough old days, the lairds of Sorworth had the security of a strongly situated house. "You're not afraid of heights, Mr. Bain?" asked this young woman.

"No," he said, "I've climbed a good deal."

"I fancy you're afraid of very little," she observed, lifting her eyebrows slightly. "Do you know that I happened to see you in the square two days ago? I thought you looked like a soldier. What were you?"

He had been a captain, he told her.

"Come down into the policies, Captain Bain," she said. As they descended, he bumped his head against a window ledge, and cried out involuntarily. She stopped, with an exclamation of sympathy.

"A mortar put a crack in my skull," Bain apologized, "and I'm still tender, and probably always will be."

"Does it pain you much, Captain Bain?"

"No; but perhaps I ought to tell you that it makes me a trifle odd, now and then. Or so people seem to think." He did not mind confiding this to her: perhaps it was the oddity he had just acknowledged, but at the moment they two seemed to him the only realities in an infinity of shadows.

"So much the better," she said, still lower—either that or something of the sort.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lurlin?"

"I mean this, Captain Bain: we seem to be birds of a feather. People hereabouts think I am rather odd. Sorworth Place is soaked in oddity. The maids won't stay. I've only one, now; the other went last week, and even Margaret, who's left, won't sleep in—she goes down to her son's cottage. I don't suppose you know why Janet went, unless someone at the King's Arms told you the gossip. Well, Janet wouldn't stay because she thought something whispered to her in the cellars. Poor timid creature! It was all fancy; for if anything were to whisper, you know, it would whisper to *me*. Would you like to see the garden? Most of it has gone back, of course."

They poked about the overgrown walks of the policies, talking of trifles, and presently strayed near the chapel ruin. "May I glance inside?" asked Bain.

"There's very little . . ." she answered, somewhat sharply. But Bain already had passed through the broken doorway. Some defaced sixteenth- and seventeenth-century monuments were fixed to the walls, and a litter of leaves encumbered the pavement. Where his feet scattered these, Bain noticed two or three ancient bronze rings fixed in stone slabs; and, being rather vain of his strength of arm, he bent, gripped one of them, and pulled upward. The stone lifted very slightly, though it was heavy, and when Bain let go the ring, the slab settled back with a dull reverberation.

"Oh, for God's sake, stop!"

He swung round to her. That delicate pallor of her young face had gone grey; she clutched at the door moulding for support. Bain took her hands in his, to save her from falling, and led her toward the house. "What is it, Mrs. Lurlin?" He felt mingled alarm and pleasure thus to have a bond between them—even the terror in her eyes.

"You shouldn't have done that! He's under, just under!"

Of course! In his wool-gathering, Bain had nearly forgotten this girl ever had a husband. He muttered something awkward, in his

contrition: "I thought . . . with the leaves about, and everything so neglected, you know . . . I thought no one would have been laid there this century."

She was calmer now, and they reentered the house through the kitchen door. "I know. They shouldn't have put anyone there, after all this time. His uncle and grandfather are in the kirkyard in the village, and his two cousins. But he had himself buried in the old crypt; he wrote it into his will. Do you understand why? Because he knew I'd loathe it. I think tea will be ready, Captain Bain."

At the tea table, in a pleasant corner room of one tower, she was cool and even witty. Bain saw in her a girl become woman in some short space, a year or two, perhaps; she was charming and possibly wise. But something stirred woefully, now and again, beneath this pretty surface. The afternoon went rapidly and smoothly. When it was time for Bain to leave, she went with him to the great door; and she said, deliberately, "Come to tea tomorrow, too, if you like."

Startled, Bain hesitated; and she caught him up, with just the hint of a flash in her eyes, before he had said anything. "But don't trouble, Captain Bain, if you're to be busy."

"I'm never busy, Mrs. Lurlin," he told her, unable to repress his old arrogant grin. "Shall I be frank? I was surprised that you should ask me. I'm thoroughly *déclassé*."

She looked at him steadily. "I believe you're decent. I have no friends, and I hate to be solitary here, day on day. I'm afraid to be alone."

"I wouldn't take you to be timid, Mrs. Lurlin."

"Don't you understand? I thought you'd guessed." She came a trifle closer to Bain; and she said, in her low sweet voice, "I'm afraid of my husband."

Bain stared at her. "Your husband? I understood—I thought that he's dead."

"Quite," said Ann Lurlin.

Somewhere in that Minoan maze of a house, a board or table creaked; the wind rattled a sash; and this little room at the stairfoot

was musty. "You know, don't you?" Mrs. Lurlin whispered. "You know something's near."

Bain stayed on at the King's Arms, and every afternoon he walked up the barren lawn to Sorworth Place for tea. Some days he came early, and with Mrs. Lurlin he tramped over the Muir of Sorworth, talking of books and queer corners and the small things of nature. Ann Lurlin, he perceived, was one of those women, now unhappily rare, who delight in knowing about squirrels' habits and in watching field mice and peeking into birds' nests; with a childlike curiosity quite insatiable.

On one afternoon, they reached the summit of the Law and looked back upon the Place. A vast twisted oak, still bare of new leaves, stood halfway between them and the house, its black branches outlined like fingers against the grey of the distant mansion. This was the finest of many brave views on the Muir of Sorworth, and they could see the colliery, a dismal smudge far down in the valley, and the red roofs of Sorworth village, at this remove still seeming the *douce* market town that it once had been. In the several days that had elapsed since Bain's first call, Mrs. Lurlin had not touched upon the theme of her parting shot at the stairfoot, and Bain had been content to let that field lie fallow. But now she clutched his arm, and he sensed that the mood was upon her again.

She was looking intently toward a rise of ground this side of the oak. "Do you —" She checked herself, and said, instead, "Do I seem rational to you, Captain?"

She did, he told her; but he said nothing of all the rest he felt about her.

"I am going to put your confidence to the test." He observed that her charming lips were pressed tightly together, when for a moment she was silent. "Do you think you see anything between us and that tree?"

Bain studied the face of the moor. At first he detected nothing; then, for just an instant, it seemed as if some large stooping creature had hurried from one hillock to another, perhaps its back showing

above the bracken. "I don't know, Mrs. Lurlin," he said, a bit too quickly. "A dog?"

"It didn't seem like a dog to you, now, did it?" She looked into his eyes, and then turned her sleek head back toward the moor.

"No. I suppose it's a man out ferreting." But he let his inflexion rise toward the end of the sentence.

"No one keeps ferrets here, Captain Bain. I'm glad you saw it, too, because I feel less mad. But I don't think anyone else would have made it out. You saw it because you know me so well, and—and because of that crack in your poor head, perhaps. I fancy it makes you sensitive to certain things."

Bain thought it kindest to be blunt: he asked her what way she was rowing.

"Let's sit down here on the heather, then," she went on, "where we can see for a good way round. I'd rather not talk about this when we're in the house. First I ought to say something about my husband."

Perceiving that all this hurt her, Bain murmured that he had been told her late husband had been no credit to the family.

"No," said Ann Lurlin, "*no*. Have you read Trollope, Captain? Perhaps you remember how he describes Sir Florian, in *The Eustace Diamonds*. Sir Florian Eustace had only two flaws— 'he was vicious, and he was dying.' Now Lizzie Eustace married Florian knowing these things; but I didn't know them about my husband when I married. I hadn't any money, and no relative left worth naming. Alastair—though he looked sick, even then—had manners. I don't suppose I wanted to look very closely. Afterward, I found he was foul."

Bain dug his fingers into the heather.

"If we were to walk down toward that tree," said Mrs. Lurlin, after a silence, "I don't think we'd meet anything, not yet. I don't believe there's any—any *body* to what we saw. I fancy it was only a kind of presentiment. I've been alone here, more than once, and caught a glimpse of something and made myself hunt; but nothing ever was there."

"Supposing a thing like that could—could rise," Bain interjected, stealthily surveying the bracken, "why should he have power over you? You're not foul."

She did not seem to hear him. "He wanted everything to be vile, and me to be vilest of all. Sometimes I think it was the pain of dying in him that made him try to befoul everything. When he found he couldn't break me, he cursed like a devil, really as if he were in hell. But I stayed with him, to his last day; I was his wife, whatever he was. Most of the time he lay with his eyes shut, only gasping; but in the evening, when he was nearly gone, I could see he was trying to speak, and I bent down, and he smirked and whispered to me, 'You think you've won free, Ann? No. Wait a year. I'll want you then.'"

"A year?" asked Bain.

"It will be a year next Friday. Now I'm going to confess something." She turned her lithe body so that her eyes looked directly into Bain's. "When I saw you in the square, I wondered if I could use you. I had some notion that I might stick a life between myself and . . . You looked no better than a daredevil. Do you mind my saying that? Something in me whispered, 'He was made to take chances; that's what he's good for.' I meant you to come to see me. I don't suppose it flatters you, Ralph, to have been snared by a madwoman."

"No," Bain answered her. "You're not mad. We both may be dolls in someone's dream, Ann, but you're not mad."

"And you'd best go, for good," she told him. "I don't want to stain you with this, now that I know you. I want you to go away."

"You can't dismiss me." Bain contrived to grin his old grin. "I'm in your net. But how am I to get into your mind, Ann? How am I to stand between you and what your memory calls up?"

"If it were only memory and fancy, I could bear it." She shut her eyes. "A glimpse of him in a dream, a trick of imagination when I turn a dark corner, the shape dodging on the moor—those might pass away. But I think he's coming. . . . Now you'll know I'm fit for Bedlam. I think he's coming—well, in the flesh, or something like."

"Nonsense!" said Bain.

"Very well, then, I'm mad. But you'll bear with me, Ralph? Perhaps something in me calls him; possibly I even control him, after a fashion. But I think he'll be here Friday night."

Believing she might faint, Bain put his big hand behind her head. "If you really think that, Ann, leave the house, and we'll go to Edinburgh or London or where you like. We'll leave now."

"Where could I live?" She nodded toward the grey castle. "It's all I have—not even enough to pay my rent anywhere else. And then, it would make no difference. I think he'd follow me. He wants life to drag down with him. Either he must break me, or he must be broken somehow himself, before he'll rest."

Bain sat awhile, and presently asked, "Do you want me to watch in Sorworth Place on Friday night, Ann?"

She turned away her head, as if ashamed of her selfishness. "I do."

It passed through his mind that she might think he was making a rake's bargain with her, over this wild business. A bargain he might have made with another woman, or even with this one at another time, he admitted to himself, but not with a woman beside herself with terror. "You understand, Ann," he blurted, "that I'm asking nothing of you, not now."

"I know," she whispered, her face still averted. "I'm offering nothing—nothing but your death of fright." Then she tried to laugh. "Who'd think, to look at you, Captain Bain, that you're so very proper? I'd rather be scandalous than damned."

Thus it was settled; and though they two walked and talked and drank their tea on the Tuesday and the Wednesday and the Thursday, they did not mention again her past or their future. Whatever sighed in some passage or cupboard of that old house, whatever shifted and faded across the moor—why, such intimations they ignored, speaking instead of the whaups that cried from the sky above them or of the stories they had loved as children.

Old Sorworth Place still was fit to stand a siege. Bain told himself as he mounted the staircase within the turret on Friday afternoon.

The lower windows could not be forced, the doors were immensely stout; anything that had substance might scrape and pound in vain outside, all night, once the bolts were shot home. Ann Lurlin herself admitted him, and they went to sit in her little study, and the hours fled, and their tea, untasted, grew cold; and at length they heard fat Margaret shuffle down the kitchen passage, open the door, and make her way through the policies toward the distant sanctuary of her son's cottage.

Then Ann's eyes seconded Bain's glance, and he ran down the stair to the kitchen door, locked it, and made sure the main door was well bolted. He returned to the study and the pale girl with the great black eyes. The night was coming on. They could think of very little to say. Here was Bain locked in for the night with the woman that he most desired, though he had known many women, too well. "Yet Tantalus's be his delight. . . ." Unless she sought him, he would not touch her, in this her hour of dismay.

"Where will you stay?" asked Bain, when the sun had sunk quite below the level of the little west window of the study.

"In my bedroom," she said, drearily enough. "There's no place safer."

Her room was in the southern tower. Bain's mind reviewed the plan of the Place. "Is there a way into the tower except through the great hall?"

She shook her sweet head. "There were doors on the other levels, once, but they were blocked long ago."

This made his work easier. "Well, then, Ann, your bogle will have to swallow me whole before he opens the door behind the hanging, and I'm a sour morsel." He didn't admit the possibility of fleshly revenants, Bain told himself, and if he could keep her safe from frenzy this one night, she might be safe forever after.

Solemn as a hanging judge, she looked at him for what seemed a long time. "You shouldn't stay here, Ralph; I shouldn't have let you." She ran her little tongue along her dry lips. "You know I never can be anything to you." This was said with a kind of frozen tenderness.

These words hurt him beyond belief; and yet he had expected them. He saw himself as if in a mirror: his shallow, tired, defiant face, his frayed clothes, every long lazy inch of himself, futile and fickle. "No," said Bain, managing a hoarse laugh, "no, Ann, of course you can't—or not tonight. I meant to sit outside your door."

Biting her lip, she murmured, "Not tonight, nor any other night, ever."

"Well," Bain said, "you needn't drive the point home with a hammer. Besides, you might care for me in better days."

She continued to look at him as if beseeching mercy. "You don't understand me, Ralph. It's not you: why, so far as I still can care for any man, I care for you. Anyway, I'm grateful to you as I've never been to anyone else, and I'd give myself to you if I could. It's not what you think. It's this: after having a year with him, I couldn't bear to be anything to a man again. It would be dreadful. I can't forget."

"Don't tell yourself that." Bain spoke slowly and heavily. "It won't be true. Given time, this night and your life with that—that fellow will wash away. But I suppose I'll be gone, and good riddance."

She lit a candle: paraffin lamps and candles were the only lighting in the Place. Now, he knew, their night of listening and guarding must commence. "You still can go, Ralph," she told him, softly. "A moment ago I hinted that I felt something for you, but that was because I tried to be kind. Kind! Well, whatever makes you do this for me? In honesty, I don't love you, though I should."

"Bravado," Bain said, "and boredom, mixed." He was glad she could not see his eyes or his mouth in that feeble candlelight. "Now up with you, and let me play my game of hide-and-seek, Ann Lurlin." He went with her to the door behind the hanging, and watched her ascend to the first turn of the stair. Looking back upon him, she contrived a smile of understanding, and was gone to her room. Alone, he felt a swelling of confidence.

"Come on, if you like, Alastair Lurlin, Esq.," he thought. "I'm your man for a bout of Creepmouse."

Before settling himself in the hall for the night, he must make sure that no one was playing tricks, a remote possibility he had kept at the

back of his mind, by way of a forlorn link with the world of solid things. So, taking his little electric torch from a pocket, he proceeded to inspect every chill corner of the Place, apart from Ann's south tower, with a military thoroughness. Certain corners in this pile were calculated to make one wary; but they were empty, every one. After half an hour or so, he found himself looking from a loophole in the north tower, and across the main block of the house he saw a light glowing from Ann's window. There she would be lying in a passion of dread. But nothing should force itself upon her this night.

Returning to the main block, he listened: nothing. "For a parson's son," he thought, "Ralph Bain gets into peculiar nooks." Then he opened a door into the great hall.

O God! Something white was by the stair door, even then slipping out of the hall into the turret. He flung himself across the hall, down the stair, and leaped the last twist of the spiral to overtake that white fugitive. It was Ann Lurlin, pressing herself against the great door.

She shuddered there in her nightgown, her slim naked feet upon the damp flagstones. For a tremulous instant he thought his own desperate longing might have stirred some impulse in her: that she might have come to him out of love or gratitude. But a glance at her face undid his hope. She was nearly out of her mind, a tormented thing fumbling at the oak, and when he took her by the arms, she panted spasmodically and managed to say, "I don't know why I'm here. I wanted to run out, run and run."

For only a moment he pressed her body to his. Then, picking her up, he carried her to the door behind the hanging, and thrust her in. "Go back, Ann: I've promised you." She put both her chill hands in his, looked at him as if she were to paint his picture, and kissed him lightly with cold lips. Then she crept up the steps. He bolted the little tapestried door from his side.

Well, back to sentry-duty. What hadn't he inspected in this house? The cellars. Down you go, Captain Bain. They were fine old Scots vaults of flinty stone, those cellars, but he detested them this night. Outside, a light rain was falling. He sat upon a broken stool in the cellar that had been a medieval kitchen, shadowed by a protruding

oven. This was the ragtaggle end of chivalry all right—a worn-out fool crouching in a crumbling house to humor a crazy girl. Then something crunched on the gravel outside the barred window. From old-soldierly habit, Bain kept stock-still in the shadow.

He saw it plain, so that there could be no possibility of illusion; and he asked himself, in a frantic sensation of which he was at once ashamed, "What have you got into, Ralph Bain, for the sake of a pretty little thing that won't be yours?"

It was a face at the slit of a window, damn it: a sickening face, the nose snubbed against the glass like a little boy's at a sweetshop. The eyelids of this face were drawn down; but while Bain watched, they slowly opened, as if drawn upward by a power beyond themselves, and the face craned awkwardly upon its neck, surveying the cellar. Somehow Bain knew, with an immense temporary relief, that he was not perceived in his sanctuary back of the oven, supposing the thing could "perceive" in any ordinary sense. Then the face withdrew from the window, and again Bain heard the gravel crunch.

Some little time elapsed before Bain could make his muscles obey him. The crunching grew fainter, and then, hearing with a preternatural acuity, he made out a fumbling at the small kitchen door down the passage. But it was a vain fumbling. Something groped, lifted the latch, pressed its weight against the barrier. The stout door did not budge. At this, Bain experienced a reckless exultation: whatever was outside in the night obeyed in some sort the laws of matter. "Go on, you dead hands," thought Bain, wildly. "Fumble, damn you, push, scratch like a cat. You'll not get at her." Rising from his stool, Bain tiptoed down the passage, and heard the stumbling feet in the gravel, moving on. Would it try the big door? Of course. Let it try.

Bain told himself he had to look at what was outside; and he made his way to the lowest loophole of the left-hand turret, which commanded the steps. There was moon enough to show him the stairs, and they were empty. But the great door, a trifle ajar, was just closing *behind* whatever had entered.

He sucked in his breath, and believed he would go mad. "O Lord!

O Lord! It's in, and I'm done for!" These phrases thrust through his consciousness like hot needles. Yet a dogged rationality contended against them. However had the door been forced? Then he thought of Ann in her nightgown. Before he had caught her, she must have drawn the bolt; and he, in his lovesick anxiety, had forgotten to try it. Collusion between the living and the damned: this conjecture of treachery woke in him, and he felt momentarily that all his days with Ann Lurlin had been part of a witch's snare. But he rejected the doubt. Whatever had moved Ann, whether simple terror and a foolish hope of flight, or some blind impulse forced upon her out of the abyss, no deceit lay in her.

These sterile reflections occupied no mensurable time. Face it out, Bain: nothing else for it. With luck, he could be in the hall first. He was up the kitchen stair and through an anteroom as fast as ever he had moved in his life. An uncertain moonlight showed him the hall, and he was alone in it, barring the way to the tapestried door; but then the door from the turret stair opened. Something entered.

Just inside the hall, the thing paused heavily. Light enough came from the great window to outline it; Bain had not the heart to pull out his torch; indeed, he could not move at all. Again he looked upon the sagging face he had seen at the cellar-loop. The thing was clothed in a black suit, all mildewed. Its slow body seemed to gather itself for new movement.

Who should be master, who should move first—these points might decide the issue, Bain hoped: perhaps a horrid logic governed this contest. Ralph Bain then compelled himself to take two steps forward, toward the middle of the hall. He looked at the dark shape by the window, and twice tried to speak, and on the third attempt a few broken words croaked from his throat: "Time you were properly buried, old man."

No answering sound came. Bain flexed his arms, but could not force himself to advance farther. He could discern no expression upon the face: only a blackened mask obedient to some obscene impulse from a remote beyond. How long they two stood there, Bain

did not know. But presently the thing swung about awkwardly, lurched over the threshold, and was gone back to the darkness of the stair-turret.

Bain thanked God with all sincerity. Now who was the hunter and who the quarry? The will was in him to make an end of this thing. Would it have gone back to the door and out into the rain? Bain listened. Yes, there came a stumbling on the stair—from above. What was it trying for? And then Bain knew. Ah, what a fool he was! It was ascending to the roofs, and would cross the slabs to the woman whose passionate terror perhaps animated its shape.

Bain went after it, slipping and bruising himself in his urgency; but as he leaped up the spiral toward the higher stories of the north tower, he felt a cold draught sweeping down upon him. The thing had got open a window, and must be upon the roof. Bain found that window, and stared into the night.

Now the rain fell heavily, and down at the foot of the wall, Sorworth Water moaned and gleamed. From Ann Lurlin's room, the candlelight cast some faint radiance upon the stone slabs of the sharp-peaked roof; and the glimmer was enough to show Bain a sodden bulk inching its way along the gutter toward the south tower, a footing precarious enough in daylight. The ruined face was averted from Bain, whatever power moved the thing being intent upon that piteous lighted window.

What propelled Ralph Bain then was an impulse beyond duty, beyond courage, beyond even the love of woman. He dropped from the window upon the wet and shimmering slabs, clambered along the gutter, and flung himself upon the dark hulk. Bain heaved with all the strength that was in him. Together, living and dead, they rolled upon the mossy old stones; together they fell.

A glimpse of the great stone wall; a flash of the savage burn; then explosion of everything, opening to the blessed dark.

Early on Saturday morning, a lone fisherman out of Sorworthness, rowing near the reefs that lie off the mouth of Sorworth Water,

thought he perceived some unpleasant mass lying nearly submerged in the tangle of kelp among the rocks. But the sea boils nastily there, and the fisherfolk of Sorworthness are of the old legend-cherishing sort, and this man recalled certain things muttered by the arthritic old hag in the chimney corner, his mother. Rather than rowing closer in, then, he worked his boat round and made back toward the decayed little harbor.

Some hours later, having got two friends into his boat for company, he returned to the skerries for a closer look; but the tide had ebbed, and if anything human or humanlike had lodged earlier among the rocks, now it was gone forever. Whatever ends in the boiling sea upon the reefs, having tumbled down the den of Sorworth Water, never wakes again.

BEHIND THE STUMPS



*And Satan stood up against Israel,
and provoked David to number Israel.*

1 CHRONICLES 21:1

POTTAWATTOMIE COUNTY, shorn of its protecting forest seventy years ago, ever since has sprawled like Samson undone by Delilah, naked, impotent, grudgingly servile. Amid the fields of rotted stumps, potatoes and beans grow, and half the inhabited houses still are log cabins thrown up by the lumbermen who followed the trappers into this land. In Pottawattomie there has been no money worth mentioning since the timber was cut; but here and there people cling to the straggling farms, or make shift in the crumbling villages.

An elusive beauty drifts over this country sprinkled with little lakes, stretches of second-growth woods and cedar swamps, gravelly upland ridges that are gnawed by every rain, now that their cover is gone. As if a curse had been pronounced upon these folk and their houses and their crops in reprisal for their violation of nature, everything in Pottawattomie is melting away.

Of the people who stick obstinately to this stump-country, some are grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the men who swept off the forest; others are flotsam cast upon these sandy miles from the torrent of modern life, thrown out of the eddy upon the soggy bank

to lie inert and ignored. Worn farmers of a conservative cast of mind, pinched, tenacious, inured to monotony, fond of the bottle on Saturday nights, eccentrics of several sorts; a silent half-breed crew of Negro-and-Indian, dispersed in cabins and sun-stricken tar-paper shanties along the back roads, remote from the county seat and the lesser hamlets that conduct the languid commerce of Pottawattomie — these are the Pottawattomie people. Decent roads have come only lately; even television is too costly for many of these folk; the very hand of government is nerveless in this poverty of soil and spirit.

Yet not wholly palsied, the grip of the State, for all that. Tax assessments necessarily are modest in Pottawattomie, but there are roads to be maintained, poaching of deer and trout to be repressed, public relief to be doled out. There exists a sheriff, intimate with the local tone, at the county seat; also a judge of probate; and the county supervisors are farmers and tradesmen without inclination to alter the nature of things in Pottawattomie. So far, government is a shadow of a shade. But now and again the State administration and the Federal administration gingerly poke about in the mud and brush of the stump-land.

A special rural census had to be compiled. Down in the capital, a plan had been drawn up concerning commodity price-levels and potential crop yields and tabulated prices. Acres of corn were to be counted, and pigs and people. Enumerators went out to every spreading wheat farm, to every five-acre tomato patch; and Pottawattomie County was not forgotten.

Always against the government, Pottawattomie; against the administration that ordained this special census, most vehemently. This new survey, Pottawattomie declared, meant more blank forms, more trips to the county seat, higher taxation, and intolerable prying into every man's household — which last none resent more than do the rural poor.

So the Regional Office of the Special Census began to encounter difficulties in Pottawattomie. Doors were shut in the faces of certified enumerators, despite threats of warrants and writs; the evasive response was common, violent reaction not inconceivable. Reports

particularly unsettling were received from the district of Bear City, a decayed village of two hundred inhabitants. Despite his pressing need for the stipend attached to the office, the temporary agent there resigned in distress at a growing unpopularity. A woman who took his place was ignored by half the farmers she endeavored to interview.

Put out, the Regional Office dispatched to Bear City a Special Interviewer: Cribben. They let him have a car and a stack of forms and rather a stiff letter of introduction to the postmaster in that town, and off he drove northward.

Being that sort of man, Cribben took his revolver with him. Once he had been a bank messenger, and he often told his associates, "The other messengers carried their guns at the bottom of their briefcases, so there'd be no chance of having to pull them if there was a stickup. But I kept my .38 handy. I was willing to have it out with the boys."

Tall, forty, stiff as a stick, this Cribben—walking with chin up, chest out, joints rigid, in a sort of nervous defiance of humanity. He looked insufferable. He was insufferable. Next to a jocular man, an insufferable man is best suited for the responsibilities that are a Special Interviewer's. Close-clipped black hair set off a strong head, well proportioned; but the mouth was petulant, and the eyes were ignorantly challenging, and the chin was set in lines of pomposity. In conversation, Cribben had a way of sucking in his cheeks with an affectation of whimsical deliberation, for Cribben had long told himself that he was admirably funny when he chose to be, especially with women. Years before, his wife had divorced him—in Reno, since (somewhat to her bewilderment) she had been able to think of no precise ground which would admit of obtaining a divorce in their own state. He lived chastely, honestly, soberly, quite solitary. He laughed dutifully at other men's jokes; he would go out of his way to write a friendly letter of recommendation; but somehow no one ever asked him out or looked him up. A failure in everything was Cribben—ex-engineer, ex-chief clerk, ex-artillery captain, ex-foundry partner. He told himself he had been completely reliable in every little particular, which was true; and he told himself he had failed because

of his immaculate honesty in a mob of rogues, which was false. He had failed because he was precise.

"Corporal, about the morning report: I see you used eraser to clean up this ink blot, instead of correction fluid. Watch that, Corporal. We'll use correction fluid. Understand?" This is the sort of thing the precise Cribben would say—if with a smile, then the wrong kind of smile; and he would compliment himself on his urbanity.

Cribben did not spare himself; no man ever was more methodical, more painstaking. Reliable in every little particular, yes; but so devoted to these particulars that generalities went to pot. Subordinates resigned and read the "help wanted" columns rather than submit to another week of such accuracy; superiors found him hopelessly behind in his work, austere plodding through tidy inconsequentialities. Truly, Cribben was intolerable. He knew the mass of men to be consistently inaccurate and often dishonest. Quite right, of course. Sensible men nod and shrug; Cribben nagged. His foundry went to pieces because he fretted about missing wrenches and screwdrivers. He thought his workmen stole them. They did; but Cribben never would confess that moderate pilferage was an item of fixed overhead. In Cribben's pertinacity there would have been something noble, had he loved precision for the sake of truth. But he regarded truth only as an attribute of precision.

So down to that sink of broken men, petty governmental service, spun Cribben in the vortex of failure. Having arrived at the abyss, which in this instance was a temporary junior clerkship, Cribben commenced to rise in a small way. In this humorless precisian the assistant chief of the Regional Office discerned the very incarnation of the second-best type of public functionary, and so set him to compelling the reluctant to complete interminable forms. Cribben became a Special Investigator, with every increase of salary authorized by statute. To entrust him with supervisory duties proved inadvisable; yet within his sphere, Cribben was incomparable. It was Cribben's apotheosis. Never had he liked work so well, and only a passion to reorganize the Regional Office upon a more precise model clouded his contentment. With the majesty of Government at his

back, the hauteur of a censor in his mien as he queried the subject of a survey or interrogated the petitioner for a grant—a man like Cribben never dreamed of more than this. For Cribben was quite devoid of imagination.

And Cribben drove north to Bear City.

False-fronted dry-goods shops and grocery stores and saloons, built lavishly of second-grade white pine when pine was cheap and seemingly inexhaustible, are strung along a broad gravelled road: this is Bear City. They are like discolored teeth in an old man's mouth, these buildings, for they stand between grass-grown gaps where casual flames have had their way with abandoned structures. One of these shops, with the usual high, old-fashioned windows and siding a watery white, is also the post office. On Saturday afternoons in little places like this, post offices generally close. But on this Saturday afternoon, in Bear City—so Cribben noted as he parked his automobile—not only the dry-goods half of the shop, but the post office too was open for business. This was tidy and efficient, Cribben reflected, striding through the door. It predisposed him to amiability.

"Afternoon," said Cribben to the postmaster. "I'm J. K. Cribben, from the Regional Office. Read this, please." He presented his letter of introduction.

Mr. Matt Heddle, Postmaster, Bear City, was behind the wrought-iron grille of the old post-office counter, a relic of earlier days and more southerly towns; and his shy wife Jessie was opposite, at the shop counter. They were not lacking in a dignity that comes from honorable posts long held in small places. Mr. Heddle, with his crown of thick white hair and his august slouch, his good black suit, and his deep slow voice, made a rural postmaster for one to be proud of.

"Why, I wish you luck, Mr. Cribben," Matt Heddle said with concern, reading the letter of introduction. Mr. Heddle desired to be postmaster for the rest of his life. "I'll do anything I can. I'm sorry about the fuss the other census man had."

"His own damned fault," Cribben said, largely. "Don't give a grouch a chance to make a fuss—that's my way. Take none of their

lip. I've handled people quite awhile. Shoot out your questions, stare 'em down. I won't have much trouble here."

He didn't. Whatever Cribben's shortcomings, he was neither coward nor laggard. Only six or seven hours a day he spent in the tourist room he had rented; and by the time six days had passed, he had seen and conquered almost all the obdurate farmers around Bear City. Their sheds and their silos, their sheep and their steers, their hired men and their bashful daughters, the rooms in their houses and the privies behind them—all were properly observed and recorded in forms and check-sheets. What Cribben could not see with his own eyes he bullied out adequately enough from the uneasy men he cornered and glowered upon. He was big, he was gruff, he was pedantically insistent. He was worth what salary the Regional Office paid. He never took "no" for an answer—or "don't know," either. He made himself detested in Bear City more quickly than ever had man before; and he paid back his contemners in a condescending scorn.

His success was the product, in part, of his comparative restraint: for he seemed to those he confronted to be holding himself precariously in check, on the verge of tumbling into some tremendous passion, like a dizzy man teetering on a log across a stream in spate. He was cruelly cold, always—never fierce, and yet hanging by a worn rope. What brute would have had the callousness, or the temerity, to thrust this man over the brink? It was safer to answer his questions and endure his prying.

Over the rutted trails of Pottawattomie County in muddy spring he drove his official automobile, finding out every shack and hut, every Indian squatter, every forlorn old couple back in the cedar thickets, every widow who boasted a cow and a chicken run. They were numbered, all numbered. This spring the birds were thick in Pottawattomie and some of the lilacs bloomed early, but Cribben never looked at them, for they were not to be enumerated. He had not an ounce of fancy in him. Six days of this and he had done the job except for the Barrens. Of all Pottawattomie, Bear City district was

the toughest nut for the Special Census, and the Barrens were the hard kernel of Bear City's hinterland.

Who lives in the Barrens, that sterile and gullied and scrub-veiled upland? Why, it's hard to say. A half-dozen scrawny families, perhaps more — folk seldom seen, more seldom heard, even in Bear City. They have no money for the dissipations of a town, the Barrens people — none of them, at least, except the Gholsons; and no one ever knew a Gholson to take a dollar out of his greasy old purse for anything but a sack of sugar or a bottle of rot-gut whiskey. The Gholsons must have money, as money goes in Pottawattomie, but it sticks to them.

On Saturday afternoon, a week after his arrival in town, Cribben entered the post office, self-satisfied and muddy. Matt Heddle was there, and Love the garage-man — Love already lively from morning libations. "Started on the Barrens this morning, Heddle," Cribben said ponderously. "Easy as falling off a log. Covered the Robinson place, and Hendry's. Eight kids at the Robinsons', dirty as worms." He looked at his map. "Tomorrow, now, I begin with this place called Barrens Mill. Not much of a road into it. It's right on Owens Creek. What d'you know about Barrens Mill, Heddle?" He pointed, his heavy forefinger stiff, at a spot on his map.

Mr. Matt Heddle was a good-natured old man, but he did not like Cribben. Pottawattomie people said that Mr. Heddle was well read, which in Pottawattomie County means that a man has three reprints of Marie Corelli's novels and two of Hall Caine's, but they were not far wrong in Heddle's case. The appetite for knowledge clutched at him as it sometimes does at pathetic men past their prime, and his devotion to the better nineteenth-century novelists, combining with some natural penetration, had made him shrewd enough. His good nature being unquenchable, he looked at grim Cribben and thought he read in that intolerant face a waste of loneliness and doubt that Cribben never could confess to himself, for terror of the desolation.

He looked at Cribben, and told him: "Let it go, Mr. Cribben. They're an ignorant bunch, the Gholsons; they own Barrens Mill.

Let it go. It'll be knee-deep in mud up there. Look up the acreage in the county office, and the assessment, and let it go at that. You've done all the work anybody could ask."

"We don't let things go in the Regional Office," Cribben said, with austerity. "I've already looked in the county book: five hundred and twenty acres the Gholsons own. But I want to know *what* Gholson."

Matt Heddle started to speak, hesitated, looked speculatively at Cribben, and then said, "It's Will Gholson that pays the taxes."

Love, who had been leaning against the counter, a wise grin on his face, gave a whiskey chuckle and remarked, abruptly: "She was a witch and a bitch, a bitch and a witch. Hal Goin' to put *her* in the census?"

"Dave Love, this isn't the Elite; it's the post office," Mr. Heddle said, civilly. "Let's keep it decent in here."

"Yes, Will Gholson pays the taxes," Cribben nodded, "but the land's not in his name. The tax-roll reads 'Mrs. Gholson'—just that. No Christian name. How do you people choose your county clerk?"

"Mrs. Gholson, old Bitch Gholson, old Witch Gholson," chanted Love. "You goin' to put *her* in the census? She's dead as a dodo."

"Will Gholson's mother, maybe, or his grandmother—that's who's meant," Heddle murmured. "Nobody really knows the Gholsons. They aren't folks you get to know. They're an ignorant bunch, good to keep clear of. She was old, old. I saw her laid out. Some of us went up there for the funeral—only time we ever went inside the house. It was only decent to go up."

"Decent, hell!" said Love. "We was scared not to go, that's the truth of it. Nobody with any brains rubs the Gholsons the wrong way."

"Scared?" Cribben sneered down at Love.

"God, yes, man. She was a damned witch, and the whole family's bats in the belfry. Old Mrs. Gholson have a Christian name? Hell, whoever heard of a witch with a Christian name?"

"You start your drinking too early in the day," Cribben said. Love snorted, grinned, and fiddled with a post-office pen. "What kind of a

county clerk do you have, Heddle, that doesn't take a dead woman's name off the books?"

"Why, I suppose maybe the Gholsons wanted it left on," Heddle sighed, placatingly. "And there was talk. Nobody wants to fuss with the Gholsons. Sleeping dogs, Mr. Cribben."

"If you really want to know," Love growled, "she cursed the cows, for one thing. The cows of people she didn't care for, and the neighbors that were too close. The Gholsons don't like close neighbors."

"What are you giving me?" Cribben went menacingly red at the idea of being made the butt of a joke: this was the one thing his humorless valor feared.

"You don't have to believe it, man, but the cows went dry, all the same. And sometimes they died. And if that wasn't enough, the Gholsons moved the fences, and the boundary-markers. They took over. They got land now that used to be four or five farms."

Mrs. Heddle, having been listening, now came across the shop to say in her shy voice, "They did move the posts, Mr. Cribben—the Gholsons. And the neighbors didn't move them back. They were frightened silly."

"It'll take more than a sick cow to scare me, Mrs. Heddle," Cribben told her, the flush fading from his cheeks. "You people don't have any system up here. What's wrong with your schools, that people swallow this stuff? How do you hire your teachers?"

"Barrens Mill is a place to put a chill into a preacher, Mr. Cribben," said Matt Heddle, meditatively. "There's a look to it . . . the mill itself is gone, but the big old house is there, seedy now, and the rest of the buildings. John Wendover, the lumberman, built it when this country was opened up, but the Gholsons bought it after the timber went. Some people say the Gholsons came from Missouri. I don't know. There's stories . . . Nobody knows the Gholsons. They've another farm down the creek. There's five Gholson men, nowadays, but I don't know how many women. Will Gholson does the talking for them, and he talks as much as a clam."

"He'll talk to me," Cribben declared.

Over Matt Heddle came a sensation of pity. Leaning across the counter, he put his hand on Cribben's. Few ever had done this, and Cribben, startled, stepped back. "Now, listen, Mr. Cribben, friend. You're a man with spunk, and you know your business; but I'm old, and I've been hereabouts a while. There are people that don't fit in anywhere, Mr. Cribben. Did you ever think about that? I mean, they won't live by your ways and mine. Some of them are too good, and some are too bad. Everybody's growing pretty much alike—nearly everybody—in this age, and the ones that don't fit in are scarce; but they're still around. Some are queer, very queer. We can't just count them like so many fifteen-cent stamps. We can't change them, not soon. But they're shy, most of them: let them alone, and they're likely to crawl into holes, out of the sun. Let them be; they don't signify, if you don't stir them up. The Gholsons are like that."

"They come under the law, same as anybody else," Cribben put in.

"Oh, the law was made for you and me and the folks we know—not for them, any more than it was made for snakes. So long as they let the law alone, don't meddle, Mr. Cribben, don't meddle. They don't signify any more than a wasps' nest at the back of the orchard, if you don't poke them." Old Heddle was very earnest.

"A witch of a bitch and a bitch of a witch," sang Love, mordantly. "O Lord, how she hexed 'em!"

"Why, there's Will Gholson now, coming out of the Elite," Mrs. Heddle whispered from the window. A greasy, burly man with tremendous eyebrows that had tufted points was walking from the bar with a bottle in either hip-pocket. He was neither bearded nor shaven, and he was filthy. He turned toward a wagon hitched close by the post office.

"Handsome specimen," observed Cribben, chafing under all this admonition, the defiance in his lonely nature coming to a boil. "We'll have a talk." He strode into the street, Matt Heddle anxiously behind him and Love sauntering in the rear. Gholson, sensing them, swung round from tightening his horse's harness. Unquestionably he was a rough customer; but that roused Cribben's spirit.

"Will Gholson," called out Cribben in his artillery-captain voice, "I've got a few questions to ask you."

A stare; and then Gholson spat into the road. His words were labored, a heavy blur of speech, like a man wrestling with a tongue uncongenial to him. "You the counter?"

"That's right," Cribben told him. "Who owns your farm, Gholson?"

Another stare, longer, and a kind of slow, dismal grimace. "Go to hell," said Gholson. "Leave us be."

Something about this earth-stained, sweat-reeking figure, skulking on the frontier of humanity, sent a stir of revulsion through Cribben; and the consciousness of his inward shrinking set fire to his conceit, and he shot out one powerful arm to catch Gholson by the front of his tattered overalls. "By God, Gholson, I'm coming out to your place tomorrow; and I'm going through it; I'll have a warrant; and I'll do my duty; so watch yourself. I hear you've got a queer place at Barrens Mill, Gholson. Look out I don't get it condemned for you." Cribben was white, from fury, and shouting like a sailor, and shaking in his emotion. Even the dull lump of Gholson's face lost its apathy before this rage, and Gholson stood quiescent in the tall man's grip.

"Mr. Cribben, friend," Heddle was saying. Cribben remembered where he was, and what; he let go of Gholson's clothes; but he put his drawn face into Gholson's and repeated, "Tomorrow. I'll be out tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Sunday," was all Gholson answered.

"I'll be there tomorrow."

"Sunday's no day for it," said Gholson, almost plaintively. It was as if Cribben had stabbed through this hulk of flesh and rasped upon a moral sensibility.

"I'll be there," Cribben told him, in grim triumph.

Deliberately Gholson got into his wagon, took up the reins, and paused as if collecting his wits for a weighty effort. "Don't, Mister." It was a grunt. "A man that—a man that fusses on Sunday—well, he deserves what he gets." And Gholson drove off.

"What's wrong, Mr. Cribben?" asked Heddle, startled: for Cribben had slipped down upon the bench outside the post office and was sucking in his breath convulsively. "Here, a nip," said Love, in concern, thrusting a bottle at him. Cribben took a swallow of whiskey, sighed, and relaxed. He drew an envelope out of a pocket and swallowed a capsule, with another mouthful of whiskey.

"Heart?" asked Heddle.

"Yes," Cribben answered, as humbly as was in him. "It never was dandy. I'm not supposed to get riled."

"With that heart, you don't want to go up to Barrens Mill—no, you don't," said the postmaster, gravely.

"She's a witch, Cribben." Love was leaning over him. "Hear me, eh? I say, she *is* a witch."

"Quiet, Love," the postmaster told him. "Or if you do go to the Barrens, Mr. Cribben, you'll take a couple of the sheriff's boys with you."

Cribben had quite intended to ask for a deputy, but he'd be damned now if he wouldn't go alone. "I'm driving to the judge for a search warrant," he answered, his chin up. "That's all I'll take."

Heddle walked with him to the boardinghouse where Cribben kept his automobile. He said nothing all the way, but when Cribben had got behind the wheel, he leaned in the window, his big, smooth, friendly old face intent: "There's a lot of old-fashioned prejudice in Pottawattomie, Mr. Cribben. But, you know, most men run their lives on prejudice. We've got to; we're not smart enough to do anything else. There's sure to be something behind a prejudice. I don't know all about the Gholsons, but there's fact behind prejudice. Some things are best left alone."

Here Cribben rolled up his window and shook his head and started the motor and rolled off.

After all, there was no more he could have said, Matt Heddle reflected. Cribben would go to Barrens Mill, probably count everything in sight, and bullyrag Will Gholson, and come back puffed up like a turkey. Misty notions. . . . He almost wished someone would

put the fear of hell-fire into the Special Interviewer. But this was only an oldfangled backwater, and Cribben was a newfangled man.

On Sunday morning, Cribben drove alone up the road toward the Barrens. In his pockets were a set of forms, and a warrant in case of need; Cribben left his gun at home, thinking the devil of a temper within him a greater hazard than any he was liable to encounter from the Gholsons. Past abandoned cabins and frame houses with their roofs fallen in, past a sluggish stream clogged with ancient logs, past mile on mile of straggling second-growth woodland, Cribben rode. It was empty country, not one-third so populous as it had been fifty years before, and he passed no one at this hour.

Here in the region of the Barrens, fence wire was unknown: enormous stumps, uprooted from the fields and dragged to the roadside, are crowded one against another to keep the cows out, their truncated roots pointing toward the empty sky. Most symbolic of the stump-country, jagged and dead, these fences; but Cribben had no time for myth. By ten o'clock he was nursing his car over the remnant of a corduroy road which twists through Long Swamp; the stagnant water was a foot deep upon it, this spring. But he went through without mishap, only to find himself a little later snared in the wet ground between two treacherous sand hills. There was no traction for his rear wheels; maddened, he made them spin until he had sunk his car to the axle; and then, cooling, he went forward on foot. Love's Garage could pull out the automobile later; he would have to walk back to town, or find a telephone somewhere, when he was through with this business. He had promised to be at Barrens Mill that morning, and he would be there. Already he was within a mile of the farm.

The damp track that once had been a lumber road could have led him, albeit circuitously, to the Gholsons. But, consulting his map, Cribben saw that by walking through a stretch of hardwoods he could — with luck — save fifteen minutes' tramping. So up a gradual ascent he went, passing on his right the wreck of a little farmhouse with high

gables, not many years derelict. "The Gholsons don't like close neighbors." Oaks and maples and beeches, this wood, with soggy leaves of many autumns underfoot and sponge-mushrooms springing up from them, clammily white. Water from the trees dripped upon Cribben, streaking his short coat. It was a quiet wood, most quiet; the dying vestige of a path led through it.

Terminating upon the crest of a ridge, the path took him to a stump fence of grand proportions. Beyond was pasture, cleared with a thoroughness exceptional in this country; and beyond the pasture, the ground fell away to a swift creek, and then rose again to a sharp knoll, of which the shoulder faced him; and upon the knoll was the house of Barrens Mill, a quarter of a mile distant.

All round the house stretched the Gholsons' fields, the work of years of fantastic labor. What power had driven these dull men to such feats of agricultural vainglory? For it was a beautiful farm: every dangerous slope affectionately buttressed and contoured to guard it from the rains, every boulder hauled away to a pile at the bend of the stream, every potential weed-jungle rooted out. The great square house—always severely simple, now gaunt in its blackened boards from which paint had scaled away long since—surveyed the whole rolling farm. A low wing, doubtless containing kitchen and woodshed, was joined to the northern face of the old building, which seemed indefinitely mutilated. Then Cribben realized how the house had been injured: it was nearly blind. Every window above the ground floor had been neatly boarded up—not covered over merely, but the frames taken out and planks fitted to fill the apertures. It was as if the house had fallen prisoner to the Gholsons, and sat Samson-like in bound and blind-folded shame.

All this was apprehended at a single glance; a second look disclosed nothing living in all the prospect—not even a dog, not even a cow. But one of the pallid stumps stirred.

Cribben started. No, not a stump: someone crouching by the stump fence, leaning upon a broken root, and watching, not him, but the house. It was a girl, barefoot, a few yards away, dressed in printed meal-sacks, fifteen or sixteen years old, and thoroughly ugly, her hair

a rat's-nest; this was no country where a wild rose might bloom. She had not heard him. For all his ungainly ways, Cribben had spent a good deal of time in the open, and could be meticulously quiet. He stole close up to the girl and said, in a tone he meant to be affable, "Well, now?"

Ah, what a scream out of her! She had been watching the blind façade of Barrens Mill house with such a degree of intensity, a kind of cringing smirk on her lips, that Cribben's words must have come like the voice from the burning bush; and she whirled, and shrieked, all sense gone out of her face, until she began to understand that it was only a stranger by her. Though Cribben was not a feeling man, this extremity of fright touched him almost with compassion, and he took the girl gently by the shoulder, saying, "It's all right. Will you take me to the house?" He made as if to lead her down the slope.

At that, the tide of fright poured back into her heavy Gholson face, and she fought in his grasp and swore at him. Cribben—a vein of prudery ran through his nature—was badly shocked: it was hysterically vile cursing, nearly inarticulate, but compounded of every ancient rural obscenity. And she was very young. She pulled away and dodged into the dense wood.

Nothing moved in these broad fields. No smoke rose from the kitchen, no chicken cackled in the yard. Overhead a crow flapped, as much an alien as Cribben himself; nothing more seemed to live about Barrens Mill. Were Will Gholson crazy enough to be peering from one of the windows with a shotgun beside him, Cribben would make a target impossible to miss, and Cribben knew this. But no movement came from behind the blinds, and Cribben went round unscathed to the kitchen door.

A pause and a glance told Cribben that the animals were gone, every one of them, to the last hen and the last cat. Driven down to the lower farm to vex and delay him? And it looked as if every Gholson had gone with them. He knocked at the scarred back door: only echoes. It was not locked; and, having his warrant in his pocket, he entered. If Will Gholson were keeping mum inside, he'd rout him out.

Four low rooms—kitchen, rough parlor, a couple of topsy-turvy

bedrooms—this was the wing of the house, showing every sign of a hasty flight. A massive panelled door shut off the parlor from the square bulk of the older house, and its big key was in the lock. Well, it was worth a try. Cribben, unlocking the door, looked in: black, frayed blinds drawn down over the windows—and the windows upstairs boarded, of course. Returning to the kitchen, he got a kerosene lamp, lit it, and went back to the darkened rooms.

Fourteen-foot ceilings in these cold chambers; and the remnants of Victorian prosperity in mildewed love seats and peeling gilt mirrors; and dust, dust. A damp place, wholly still. Cribben, telling his nerves to behave, plodded up the fine sweep of the solid stairs, the white plaster of the wall gleaming from his lamp. Dust, dust.

A broad corridor, and three rooms of moderate size, their doors ajar, a naked bedstead in each; and at the head of the corridor, a door that stuck. The stillness infecting him, Cribben pressed his weight cautiously upon the knob, so that the squeak of the hinges was faint when the door yielded. Holding the lamp above his head, he was in.

Marble-topped commode, washbowl holding a powder of grime, fantastic oaken wardrobe—and a tremendous Victorian rosewood bed, carven and scrolled, its towering head casting a shadow upon the sheets that covered the mattress. There *were* sheets; and they were humped with the shape of someone snuggled under them.

“Come on out,” said Cribben, his throat dry. No one answered, and he ripped the covers back. He had a half-second to stare before he dropped the lamp to its ruin.

Old, old—how old? She had been immensely fat, he could tell in that frozen moment, but now the malign wrinkles hung in horrid empty folds. How evil! And even yet, that drooping lip of command, that projecting jaw—he knew at last from what source had come the power that terraced and tended Barrens Mill. The eyelids were drawn down. For this only was there time before the lamp smashed. Ah, why hadn’t they buried her? For she was dead, long dead, many a season dead.

All light gone, Cribben stood rigid, his fingers pressed distractedly against his thighs. To his brain, absurdly, came a forgotten picture out of his childhood, a colored print in his *King Arthur*: "Launcelot in the Chapel of the Dead Wizard," with the knight lifting the corner of a shroud. This picture dropping away, Cribben told his unmoving self, silently but again and again, "Old Mrs. Gholson, old witch, old bitch," as if it were an incantation. Then he groped for the vanished door, but stumbled upon the wire guard of the broken lamp.

In blackness one's equilibrium trickles away, and Cribben felt his balance going, and knew to his horror that he was falling straight across that bed. He struck the sheets heavily and paused there in a paralysis of revulsion. Then it came to him that no one lay beneath him.

Revulsion was swallowed in a compelling urgency, and Cribben slid his hands sweepingly along the covers, in desperate hope of a mistake. But no. There was no form in the bed but his own. Crouching like a great clumsy dog, he hunched against the headboard, while he blinked for any filtered drop of light, show him what it would.

He had left the door ajar, and through the doorway wavered the very dimmest of dim glows, the forlorn hope of the bright sun without. Now that Cribben's eyes had been a little time in the room, he could discern whatever was silhouetted against the doorway — the back of a chair, the edge of the door itself, the knob. And something *moved* into silhouette: imperious nose, pendulous lip, great jaw. So much, before Cribben's heart made its last leaping protest.

THE PRINCESSES OF ALL LANDS



*Your soul deserves the place to which it came
If having entered hell, you feel no flame.*

EVERY ROADSIDE STAND, as Yolande drove swiftly northward, still displayed its pumpkins, its bunches of Indian corn, its jugs of cider. This was the last day of October, the weather clear and warm for the season, here and there bonfires of leaves sending up their pungent offering to the powers of dissolution. Once the schools let out at half-past three, the children of the villages along this old highway would straggle home, witches and Indians and marauders, bags of Hallowe'en-party candy clutched in their fists.

Yolande had become twenty-eight years old on this day, suffused with love of life amidst the commemoration of death, the virtue stirring within her, on her way home to her little baby and her big husband and tonight's jack-o'-lantern party. There almost never being any police-car along this bypassed route, Yolande stepped on the gas: it was a long drive up from the quarterly commission meeting at the state capital.

At a rural intersection, a traffic-light halted her. A young girl, perhaps sixteen, was standing on the shoulder—no baggage, but clearly hitchhiking. Across the road was a hamburger-stand, a pickup

truck parked in front of it; two burly men loitered there, looking speculatively at the girl. Not liking their faces, Yolande rolled down her window and called out to the girl, "Going north?"

The hitchhiker bounded into Yolande's station-wagon. She was swarthy, rather plump, and apparently wore only a loose sweater, jeans, and tennis-shoes: not ugly, but hard-faced and well over sixteen, Yolande saw at close range—perhaps twenty. Yolande whizzed through the green light toward home, still more than a hundred miles distant.

"If you hadn't of picked me up," the girl said, "I'd of got in with them truckers. You know what they'd prob'ly done to me after a few miles?" She proceeded to a frank and graphic description, omitting no obscenities. "Men!" she concluded. "Rats are better'n men."

"Some are different," Yolande commented mildly. Really she shouldn't have invited this girl; yet perhaps she had been sent to her for some purpose, as often people had been sent to her before. Already she could perceive that this one required discreet management. "Where are you bound?"

"Pompey Eye," the girl muttered.

This peculiar place-name stirred some dim memory in Yolande. Armies rose—or rather, they hadn't risen—where Pompeius Magnus stamped his foot. Wasn't it Pompey, slain on an Egyptian beach, who had no tomb? Where had she heard of Pompey Eye? "I've never been there; it's not on this road," she told the girl. "If you'll open the glove-compartment, you'll find a map."

Unfolding the road-map, the girl pointed to a dot on a side road, at least seventeen miles to the west of this highway. Yolande slowed down to observe. "Pompeii" read the map's small print. "Does everybody there pronounce it Pompey Eye?" Yolande cautiously inquired.

"What else?" The girl snorted. "Think they'd call it Las Vegas? It's just a hick place with a gas station and a grocery store."

"Do you live there?"

"Not now. I been comin' up from Florida to see my daddy; he's got a place by Pompey Eye. It's my daddy's birthday."

This was encouraging. "Oh, it's my birthday too," Yolande exclaimed. "That's why I'm in such a hurry. We'll have a Hallowe'en party and a birthday party all in one, and it's our baby's first birthday party."

The girl stared at her fixedly—but Yolande was used to that. "You're pretty. You married?"

"Yes, for seven years, but just one baby."

"I never had no baby," the girl remarked, less harshly than she had spoken before. "Babies are cute. I got married when I was fourteen, but they put seven slugs into my husband's head next day, an' I never had no babies. I bet men go crazy 'bout you."

"One is, and I'll have a party with him tonight. I'm so sorry about your husband. What happened, or would it hurt to tell?"

"I had plenty trouble with men before an' after that." The girl's mouth twisted. "My brother, too. Don't like no man but my daddy."

"You poor kid!" Yolande stretched out her arm, meaning to put it round the girl's shoulders; but she shrank away, saying, "I don't need no help."

This was a hard case, Yolande reflected, conceivably beyond redemption. She and her husband took in unwed mothers, people out of prison, and more difficult types than those, but there existed limits beyond which one wasted the virtue. Still, this girl might have been sent to her; she would try—which would not be facile, for already she felt some aversion to this companion.

"This is a richy car," the girl was saying. "You and your husband in the bucks?"

"We cast our bread upon the waters." Yolande laughed. "He's a kind of doctor." The girl had not given her name, and probably didn't mean to; nor would Yolande, not yet; this was a little creature who preferred anonymity, doubtless with reasons.

"Docs are rich," the girl declared. "Your husband do abortions?"

"Never. You might call him a doctor of souls. He makes his money by being a psychoanalyst, but it's parapsychology that interests him. That's why, in the beginning, he paid attention to me."

"Souls!" The girl snorted again. "Then he's doctor o' nothin'. There ain't no souls. You ask my daddy." Here she stopped herself, as if thinking better of what she had meant to add, and then volunteered merely, "He's an Indian."

This was a bond of sorts—perhaps an opportunity for breaking down the girl's wariness. "Why," Yolande cried cordially, "I'm part Indian myself"

The girl inspected her afresh. "Yeah, I kin see that." She was surveying Yolande's high cheekbones, her long black hair worn in braids, the flair of her nostrils. "But you're more a half-breed than me."

"My great-great-grandfather was an Indian prophet and conjuror, they say, great in the Ghost Dance."

"Hell, there ain't no ghosts. When you're dead, you're dead an' you rot, that's all." The girl seemed much irritated. "What'd we do if ghosts went dancin' round?"

Yolande went on little discouraged. "And my grandmother was a famous medium. My husband says that the virtue may skip every other generation, but nobody really knows about that. Maybe our baby won't have the virtue."

"Virtue! You show me a man with virtue!"

"I could," Yolande murmured, "but it's not that sort of virtue I mean. I'm talking about virtue as an essence, a power, something that flows into you and out of you, letting you do acts that are good or evil. Remember—'Jesus, at once knowing that *virtue* had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes?' That's according to Saint Mark."

This girl didn't remember. "You a Jesus freak?"

"Not as you mean. But sometimes my husband and I can heal. He has the wisdom, I the virtue. Without him to control me, I might be dangerous."

"You dangerous?" The girl chuckled joylessly. "I bet you never stuck a knife in nobody."

"Have you?"

"My ma, she don't live with my daddy no more. I stopped by to see her, though, couple o' years ago. She's livin' in Chicago with six niggers and a wetback, soused most days. I come friendly-like, but she calls me bad names, an' I tell her to stop, but she keeps on. So I run the bread-knife into her backside."

Was this true? Anything might be true of this one: handle with care. "What did your mother say to that?" Yolande asked, composedly. She wondered if the mother had survived. With this girl, it was well to show no emotion on your face.

"She falls down on the floor and says, 'Daughter, I'm sorry.' Oh, she was sorry, all right. I ain't been back to see her since. What's your ma like?"

"She died when I was twenty-one, before I married."

"What'd she die of?"

"Mother had a weak heart, and an Indian scared her, and she died in my arms that night, my birthday night. But she was brave."

"You live on a reservation?"

"No, but it was half-wild country."

"You act like you owned it."

"I suppose I thought I did—all of it, and more besides. I've had to watch my pride. When I was little, they had a nickname for me: 'the Princess of All Lands.' They halfway meant it, for they saw the virtue begin to come to me early; indeed, I suppose it was in me from the first."

"You mean you was a kook when you was a baby?"

"If that's what you like to call it," Yolande answered, unperturbed. "For one thing, very early I could see things that other people couldn't. I had a friend that nobody else ever beheld. He had a name: Doctor Cady. Perhaps he told me that name, but I rather think I gave it to him. He used to visit me when I was playing with dolls behind the woodshed. He seemed very big and strong, and he had a red beard. Sometimes I could make him come if I wished strongly enough; other times he came without being asked. After I started going to church, I began to think he was my guardian

angel—though who ever heard of an angel named Cady? How does the little prayer go?

*"Angel of God, my guardian dear,
To whom God's love commits me here,
Ever this day be at my side
To rule and guard, to light and guide."*

"After I was seven, I didn't see him, but I felt that he was near sometimes; and I still think that he, or some presence, is near when the virtue stirs in me. Certain people might call Doctor Cady a 'familiar,' but I know he's something nicer than that."

"Oh, yeah? You were some nutty kid."

"Perhaps. Still, a curious episode happened when I was five, and after that my grandmother and father and mother half believed in Doctor Cady. It was behind the woodshed, as usual, and Doctor Cady had come to amuse a lonely little girl. Then a rattlesnake crawled out of the woodpile. There weren't many rattlesnakes where we lived, and we kept pigs to persecute those few, but this one snake came squirming out. I squealed, and Doctor Cady picked up the snake by the tail and flung him into the weeds. The snake simply lay there. A little later I told Father about it, and he went to see, even though he chuckled about Doctor Cady. The snake still was there—dead, all *seared*, as if a million volts of electricity had gone through him."

"I git a charge out o' you, lady."

"So did the snake. But why not? Aren't we all really collections of particles of electricity, positive and negative charges held together by Lord knows what law or power? We seem substantial flesh and blood, but aren't we all just energy, body and soul? And some few, very few, can direct the energy, sometimes. I'm a ghost in a machine: now don't be frightened."

"You don't skeer me."

"My husband says that if he hadn't taken me in hand after I was fourteen, someone might have put me into a travelling show and sent

me round the country as the Beautiful Witch. Or in an earlier time, they would have burnt me. 'I don't know whether you're a sport or a mutant,' he tells me. I fascinate him in more ways than one. He doesn't laugh at Doctor Cady. My husband says that it's right enough to call me the Princess of All Lands, because I might take the kingdoms of the earth if I abused my virtue. It can be a power for good or a power for evil, a power for healing or a power for blasting. Is that what Joan of Arc had?"

"If you talk like that they'll lock you up, lady."

"Why, I suppose they might have done so already, if my husband hadn't taught me to repress myself—never, or almost never, to fall into a bad temper. It's such a worry, the virtue in me." Yolande swerved the car to avoid a dead dog, and then talked on.

"I know it sounds silly—the Princess of All Lands, with power over the quick and the dead. Yet Doctor Cady wasn't purely imaginary. I think it was he who first called me Princess, and I passed on the name, haughtily, to my family. Shall I tell you something even stranger? My husband looks just like Doctor Cady, as I remember my big friend behind the woodshed—and of course he's a doctor, too. But I met Doctor Cady long years before the doctor who's my husband found me. Is my husband really my guardian angel? Sometimes I suspect that; yet angels don't father children, they say. It's a world of mysteries, isn't it? Oh, I'd be a risk to everybody if my husband didn't keep me under his thumb, even though I don't really want the kingdoms of this earth."

The girl only grunted; she mustn't bore her. Why was she telling all this to a girl who couldn't understand one syllable of the mysteries? Why, to keep her from launching again into all that obscene and horrid talk. How many miles to the Pompeii junction? Too many. Yolande's memory ran giddily back to those strange years of her childhood. She had been able to make plates fly off the mantelpiece, without visible cause; she had compelled the poker and the tongs to dance. Her grandmother the medium had been impressed but not amazed; her parents had been frightened for her.

The notoriety of the "racketing spirit" which little Yolande could raise had filtered, vaguely, all the way to universities and special institutes. And the famous doctor had come from the south to the log house on Lake Superior to see the juvenile witch. He had found her intelligent, cheerful, dutiful, enthusiastic—qualities rare in such people as are supposed to possess occult powers, or to be possessed by them. Also he had found her lovely, even at fourteen, when first he visited her family. More wondrous things occurred in that big log house, and round about it, than ever had happened to the Wesleys at Epworth Rectory.

The great doctor from the Institute, with his red beard, had instructed her mother in how to deal with Yolande—how to discipline her without crushing her. The doctor himself advanced no dogmatic theories about her "virtue" then; he still didn't.

Yolande had been so remarkable a case that the famous doctor himself had put up half the money for sending her to a boarding-school kept by an especial order of nuns. She had done well in that school, and had not permitted her virtue to get out of hand.

When she had finished at the convent school, the doctor had found the money for her to spend four years in Switzerland, at a very good college for foreign girls; also it had been near a Swiss clinic where she had been tested politely, and had been studied intensively—though to nobody's satisfaction. When she returned home, in her twentieth year, the doctor with the red beard had been mightily pleased to find that she continued "normal" in outward behavior, and that she was lovelier than before. She had been taught a good deal at the Swiss school—deportment, and piano, and even academic disciplines—these last in rather an old-fashioned nineteenth-century style, she perceived now. That had been all to the good in learning literature; fairly harmless in learning history; not so wise in learning the natural sciences, for they had tried to stuff into her a mechanism and a materialism which her own precocious experiences belied. The red-bearded doctor, anyway, had come to love her; and she had loved him long before that.

"Hey, you goin' to sleep at the wheel?" Yolande came out of her reverie.

This sulky child beside her must be diverted. It was weary work, trying to scour vessels for dishonor. This girl was empty; for a little while it had seemed as if she weren't even there in the car beside her.

"We're both part Indian," said Yolande, "so you won't mind if I tell you about a certain bad Indian." The girl probably would relish this particular true narration, and there would be time enough for it before the Pompeii junction. Yolande skillfully passed two cars and then began to spin her grim tale.

"I was born in a log house, very old, on Lake Superior," Yolande said. "The building had been a trading-post in the early days, and my grandfather and great-grandfather on my father's side had run it, and others of our family before that, all the way back to the beginning of the eighteenth century. We had a farm, too. I don't know how much Indian I am—those French-Canadian ancestors of mine intermarried generation after generation. There's Irish in me, too. My father could speak the patois, but I can't.

"Indians still came, when I was a little girl, sometimes, a few of them, mostly looking for handouts."

"That sounds like my daddy. He wanders round a lot." The girl drew from the pocket of her jeans a glue-bottle, unscrewed the cap, and began sniffing it. "My daddy, he says, 'Daughter, don' you sniff that there glue more'n once a week.' But he ain't around right now."

It had been a blunder to have picked up this girl, Yolande knew now, and Pompeii junction still was miles ahead. The thing to do was to keep her entertained. Well, I can talk all day, scarcely drawing breath, Yolande reflected. The girl's eyes were dilating.

"There was one Indian we dreaded," Yolande went on, still smoothly, "and he seemed to come just every seventh year. Do you know, he came the day I was born! Ours was a lonely farmhouse, and this Indian wanted money for whiskey. He claimed to be some sort of distant cousin. All that my father gave him was a meal. The doctor

didn't arrive in time to deliver me, so my father and grandmother and Aunt Susan were busy bringing me into the world. They kept an old bull bitch as a watchdog, and they heard her howling, but they didn't have time right then to find out why. Afterward they came upon her in the woods, dead, beaten with a club and then stamped to death. Father thought that Indian 'cousin' did it."

"Sounds like my daddy," said the girl. "He don' like dogs."

"On my seventh birthday," Yolande went on, rather hurriedly, "that very same Indian came back. I think I can remember him in the kitchen. He walked in a kind of crouch, like a wildcat about to spring, and he was singing or chanting half the time.

"'Turn that man out of here,' said my grandmother, the Indian woman, in her blunt way. 'Turn him out now.' She was the medium I told you about. Father wasn't perfectly sure that this Indian 'relative' had killed our dog, so he let him sleep in the barn, though not in the house, that Hallowe'en. Just before dawn, we smelled smoke: the barn was afire. It nearly caught the house. The Indian was gone."

"Sounds like my daddy," the girl repeated. "He likes to burn things."

"And do you know," Yolande continued, "the Indian returned on my *fourteenth* birthday, really? That's what people call coincidence, but I suspect there aren't any coincidences. Everything may be some power's design, for good or ill.

"Father met him in the yard, and I was with Father. The Indian looked me over slowly. 'Honeybun,' he said, and reached out to stroke my hair, but Father pulled me back. The Indian had a string of trout that he'd caught, and Father gave him a dollar and told him to clear out. We couldn't prove anything about the barn-burning seven years before."

"Sounds like my daddy," the girl interjected, grinning—two teeth were missing—" 'cause he's gone fishin' more of'en than not."

"Uuummm." Yolande compressed her lips. "My father died that night, in terrible pain; we lived a long way from any doctor. Afterward they said it may have been food poisoning. He had eaten the

four trout, because the rest of us didn't think these fish looked especially fresh. My virtue couldn't help him, though I tried. Maybe it was an accident. He was a good father. The Indian cousin wasn't to be found anywhere."

"My daddy traps," said the girl, "an' he knows how to make poisons o' deadly nightshade an' sech-like plants, to set for varmints."

"What's your father's name?"

"Some places he takes one name, some places he uses other names. Me too."

There is more than one type of Daddy in this world, Yolande reflected. "But the very worst thing," she ran on, "was on my twenty-first birthday, cross my heart and hope to die. Many things had happened during those seven intervening years. The 'virtue'—that's what we ordinarily call it, for lack of a better word—grew stronger in me not long after Father died, and I began to play silly games with it. I could even make little flames appear in the middle of carpets—and they burned real holes. Already I had more virtue than ever my grandmother the medium had possessed."

"You're kooky, real kooky," said the girl, ferociously.

At her tone, Yolande started—though not noticeably, she hoped. For some reason she dreaded this girl, and not because of the glue-bottle and the dilated pupils only. Dogs could smell the human fear-scent; conceivably this girl, so close to the beast-realm, might have detected Yolande's disquiet if it hadn't been for the glue. She *must* keep on talking.

"Well, on my twenty-first birthday I was alone in the old house with Mother, and we went to bed, and about three in the morning Mother heard a noise downstairs, and then more noises—though I slept on for a time, because I'd run up and down the lake shore half that week, from joy at being home from Switzerland.

"What Mother had heard had been somebody throwing things around and stirring the fire in the fireplace. We were quite alone in the house, remember. Without waking me, Mother took the shotgun from the rack and tiptoed down the stairs.

"She found that same sinister Indian! He was drunk, and had forced open a window to get in, and was tossing more logs on the fire, making himself at home. Mother pointed the gun at him and asked what he wanted; I heard their voices and came downstairs too.

"‘Honeybun!’ he grunted when he saw me in my nightgown, and just stood there, leering at me. But Mother told him to get out, the shotgun trembling in her hands; and he must have known that a gun is more dangerous than ever if it’s held by a woman who doesn’t really know how to use it — and has a finger on the trigger. So he went back out the window, and Mother contrived to lock and barricade it behind him, and we didn’t see him after.

"‘Oh, Mother!’ I told her, holding her in my arms when she slipped to the floor, ‘why didn’t you wake me? I could have managed him without the gun.’

"‘Yes, dear,’ she said faintly, trying to smile, ‘but that virtue of yours might have set the whole house ablaze. And I’d rather not meet your Doctor Cady.’”

Yolande paused and then resumed. "Sometimes I think that Indian is our family Azrael, separating body and soul. Doesn’t anyone else ever see him? I can’t get him out of my head: he swaying in the firelight, gabbling something or other, humming a tune while Mother threatened him, then dropping out the window without a sound. Even if the sheriff had caught him, I don’t suppose he could have been charged with anything worse than unlawful entry." Yolande stepped on the gas.

"It was too much for Mother: she’d suffered two heart-attacks earlier that year. We had a telephone, but the line had been cut, and I didn’t dare leave Mother to go for the doctor. She collapsed on the parlor sofa. Toward morning I couldn’t feel any pulse. She was buried beside Father and Grandmother and Aunt Susan in St. Anne’s graveyard. What that Indian had wanted, I don’t know: perhaps he was simply after food and liquor, but Mother thought he was after me."

"Sounds like my daddy," said the girl. "He likes women. Two or

three times they put him in jail for it, but they couldn't keep him."

"A few days after the funeral," Yolande concluded, trying to ignore two tears rolling down her cheeks, "the red-bearded doctor from the Institute asked me to marry him. He was old enough to be my father, but I loved him the more for that. We've kept the old log house, and our dear baby will love it as she grows up. Our marriage has everything. We work together, and he knows how to direct the virtue so far as anybody knows. He's not afraid of me at all."

"Yeah?" the girl said. She was growing restive.

But deliverance was at hand. Just ahead, a narrow gravel road joined the highway on the left, and the metal sign said, "Pompeii 17 mi."

Yolande slowed down. "Here you are," she announced. "I'm sure you can get another ride soon. I've got to get home just as quickly as I can, because the woman who minds the baby has to leave by supper-time." This was not precisely true, but Yolande had come to loathe the girl beside her—without knowing quite why.

"But I'm goin' to Pompey Eye," the girl told her, ominously.

"I'd take you there if I possibly could," Yolande said, still contriving to smile, "but I simply haven't time. There'll be other cars. . . ."

"I'm goin' to Pompey Eye," the girl repeated. She pulled up her sweater and pulled down the waistband of her jeans. From the region of her groin protruded an efficient-looking pistol.

Yolande hesitated. Then, without changing expression, she swung the station-wagon westward toward Pompeii.

This Pompeii road being rough and tortuous, Yolande had some excuse for driving slowly. The girl did not appear to notice the slackening of speed, for now she was dominating the conversation.

Yolande had surmised that directness would be best. "Why are you carrying that gun?" she had asked.

"It's a present for my daddy: he likes to shoot things up. Anyways, I carry a gun most o' the time. Never know when you might want it.

One time I git a ride in a truck with this here wise guy, an' he starts pawin' me. I warn him off, but he don' stop, so's I pull this baby an' shoot him in the leg."

"Didn't they arrest you for that?" Yolande kept her eyes fixed on the winding road.

"Naw, it was after sundown at the edge o' a little burg, an' prob'ly, if anybody hears, they think it's a backfire. Anyways, he warn't hurt all that bad.

"'Git out, you!' I says to him, an' I shove over an' take the wheel while he's limpin' out o' the cab.

"'You gonna ditch me here bleedin' like a pig?' this wise guy says. I don' say nothin', but drive roun' the block an' come back to him again; nobody ain't turned up.

"'Git back in an' drivel' I tell him.

"'But I'm shot!' he says to me.

"'You kin still drive,' I says. So I make him drive me ten more miles, all bleedin', till we get to a big town, an' then I git out an' run for it. He's pretty weak by then. Maybe he didn't report nothin'. Prob'ly he was in some racket an' didn't want nobody fussin' with his load. Men!"

She took another whiff of the glue-bottle, and then launched into renewed discourse concerning the iniquities of the opposite sex. Down to this girl, dull-witted and unschooled, somehow there had drifted the slogans and liberation-chic of bored bourgeois Women's Lib zealots, Yolande guessed; and in this girl those grudges were stoked by deeper resentments. What was the quip about modern society that Yolande had read somewhere? "Like German beer—dregs at the bottom, scum at the top."

The girl had not exhibited her pistol again: a thin pretense of amiability was maintained. But the girl's eyes were altogether wild now. This was a neglected road, only two or three farmhouses set back some rods, and those looking derelict. Yolande was terrified for the two of them, the girl and herself; most of all she feared for her baby and her husband, who might not see her again. Powers of dark-

ness roam the world, she had read, seeking whom they may devour. Why should she be given to such?

Was there a purpose in all this? Could she be meant somehow to rescue this girl and her father and her brother, as she had helped others? Had she virtue sufficient for that task? To outward appearance unmoved, Yolande tried hard to dredge up from her retentive memory the echoes of that place-name Pompeii—Pompey Eye. What had she heard about it? Last days? Bulwer-Lytton? Golden House of Nero? Grottoes? No, something fairly recent and quite nasty in this particular word-association. Three swamp folk and Pompey Eye . . .

There came to Yolande, as the girl maundered on, one of her waking visions. She perceived in her mind's eye, in all detail, a place in the woods: dead elm trees, birches, a sprawling bog, in the foreground a shallow excavation. Yes, it was a grave. A spade was thrust into a heap of fresh wet soil. Was this a vision of what had been or of what was to be? The virtue did not tell her that. And now, from a distance, something limp and heavy was being carried toward the hole. Two men bore it. She could see them laboring between the naked trees and among the leafless shrubs, and she shivered.

Then everything fell into place, within her mind, and there came to her the memory for which she had been questing. Pompeii! She had evoked the name's associations, more horrid than any volcano. What had occurred at Pompeii, this little Pompeii, only last year—why, it had been in all the newspapers, though she did not read of such crimes more than she had to.

Her waking vision passed away, mercifully, and now Yolande knew; she knew what her peculiar perceptions had been trying to tell her ever since the girl entered the car; she knew what the girl was. Such an experience would be put upon the Princess of All Lands and none other. Yolande's loathing of this gabbling girl swelled even more monstrous than before. Without the virtue, she would have fainted then and there.

Nothing could be done for this girl: too late, irrevocably late. Then

why had this trial been inflicted upon her, Yolande? Was she a pawn to be sacrificed in a game between Light and Darkness?

One conceivable sanctuary remained, before worst should come to worst: the village of Pompeii itself. There would be no dishonor in flight from this encounter. If she should brake the car abruptly in the main street and leap out, would the girl fire? And would she be vulnerable to the girl's bullets? There was no telling, in this debatable realm between quick and dead. If there should be many people in the street, or a policeman, she might chance it.

Slowly they drove into Pompeii, Pompey Eye. A filling station. "I'll pull in here to gas up," Yolande said, hoping her voice did not quaver overmuch.

The girl glanced at the fuel gauge. "You don' need none yet," she declared, "an' anyways this here station's shut." So it was. Pompeii was a shrinking hamlet, with no suggestion of Roman pleasures except the name itself. An old man and an older woman were the only folk on the short street: no help. But there was a grocery store—still open, for the old woman hobbled into it.

"Let's see if there's a cake for your father's birthday," Yolande suggested timorously. "Let me buy it."

"My daddy don' eat no cake; what he wants is booze, an' they don' sell none o' that in Pompey Eye. Keep goin'."

How far this lost girl's power might extend over her, here in this shadowy village of Pompeii, between two realms of being, Yolande could not tell. If sacrificing herself had offered salvation to someone, she might have tested that gun's power, or even gone on to the end of this journey for the final contest; but already the battle had been fought, so that her own destruction could not alter the judgment upon this girl. Even had it been otherwise, her duty lay with her husband and her baby, not with this vessel for dishonor in the station-wagon beside her.

She would flee if the odds for survival seemed tolerable. "Does your father live on a side street?" At the last moment, Yolande might abandon the car, run for it, seek shelter in some neighbor's house.

"Nope, his place is a piece out in the woods. Keep goin'; I'll show you where."

That forlorn hope abandoned, Yolande obeyed in silence. She felt the weight of some invisible domination or power, not to be resisted. They turned from the narrow county road into a mere track, doubtless a lumbermen's trail once. The second-growth forest closed round them. This was swamp-country, altogether desolate. And the farther they drove, groaning along ruts and through potholes, the more aggressive the girl grew—sure of her prey now.

"My brother'll be there too. He ain't bright, but he kin drink as much as my daddy. They beat each other up once a week or so. Daddy an' Brother'll like you a lot, 'cause you're gorgeous. You gotta come in an' meet 'em."

It was like being invited to meet Grendel's mother, Yolande told herself. Could this girl's lost heart be touched at all? "My baby will be crying for me, and my husband won't know what's happened to me," she entreated. "Can't I let you out here? I could turn around in that old clearing. You like babies—you told me you did."

It might have been better for herself, Yolande thought in this moment, had she grown up less beautiful. There exist depraved natures, perhaps more numerous in this age than in other times, which pull the wings off butterflies and burn cats alive: they lie in wait for the innocent endowed with the fatal gift. Yet even such, if sometimes one strikes the right chord in them at the right hour, may be dissuaded, God willing.

For a fraction of a second the girl's heavy face softened—and then soured. She pulled the gun out of her jeans. "Keep goin', I told you. You're jest like the other woman we fetched in here. I'm bringin' my daddy two birthday presents, this gun an' you. Daddy's goin' to have lots o' fun with you, an' my brother, too." She sniffed her glue vigorously.

Yolande fought down an anger that would have been devastating. "Wouldn't you rather have money than me? There's only a few dollars in my purse, but my husband . . ."

"Yeah, that's what the other woman said. We got both of 'em, the money, the woman."

"Where is she now?"

The girl snarled like a brute, her broken teeth showing, and thrust the gun against Yolande's middle. "Don' you ask no more questions! Ain't I told you there ain't no ghosts?"

Still the station-wagon lumbered along that trail, crunching over fallen limbs now and again; once, holding the gun on her, the girl compelled Yolande to get out of the car and drag the rotten trunk of a birch-tree from the faint track. Red-winged blackbirds, gathering in these marshes for southward flight, flapped up alarmed at the car's passage.

"You don't know what you're getting into," Yolande ventured, gun or no gun. "You're not clever enough to carry this off. The sheriff would trace us, and . . ."

The girl poked her with the gun again, and shook her head complacently. "Don' nobody know where you turned off the highway; don' nobody know where my daddy lives; don' nobody know we got you; don' nobody never come here till deer season. You ain't gonna be here then. Sheriff!" She spat on the floor of the car.

"There's something else," Yolande insisted. "I wish this cup would pass from me. But we're both in danger—you, too. And your danger is worse than my danger."

"If you'd seed what happened to the other one, 'Princess,' you'd know there ain't no danger worsen your danger. She didn't do like she was tolt."

Whatever the peril, Yolande must make a final attempt upon this girl's feelings. "I think a devil has got inside you," Yolande began, "and he's eaten up nearly all of you. But if there's anything left to save, let me try to help. Let me touch you. . . ."

The girl jerked back and jammed the pistol into Yolande's belly. Yet for an instant, something intelligent had gleamed in the girl's eyes, perhaps some fragment of dreadful memory—as if the terror of her condition had been apprehended ever so briefly, and then

blotted out. She cursed Yolande foully and at length. "Keep on drivin'!"

The station-wagon came to the wreck of a wooden bridge, the planks of its floor carried off by some flood. "Take the car down alongside," the girl directed, "an' head downstream."

Yolande stared at her: "You'd drown both of us?"

"You'll see. Gravel bed, and shallow, an' only a hun'erd yards to go. Then swing left."

Sure enough, the creek-bed, though broad, carried merely a trickle of water: just enough to efface the station-wagon's tracks. A front wheel went into a hole, but Yolande gunned the motor, and in second gear the car came out. Now on the left was a gently sloping gravel bank, a space between two oaks; after considerable twisting of the wheel and gunning, Yolande thrust the station-wagon up that bank, through bushes, to a sort of prairie.

"Not bad drivin'," the girl commented. "Knew you could do it, 'cause we take the truck through. Who'd track a car here?"

So here Yolande was at the end of the world. When a little girl, she would have loved this secret place; now she was meant to be buried here.

*"Beware, beware the Bight of Benin:
Few come out though many go in."*

That other woman had passed this way, not to emerge in this life.

On they drove, bumping across the vestige of a forty-acre field, young poplars overgrowing most of it. Beyond the far boundary, marked by a ragged stump fence, commenced a northern swamp-jungle, seemingly impenetrable. This must be some hardscrabble homestead abandoned decades ago, never truly fit for cultivation, now the lair of squatter predators.

Yolande made out the cabin and some tottering sheds, sepulchral as twilight settled upon them. "Daddy'll git the surprise o' his life!" the girl was whooping. At her order, Yolande switched off the ignition at the dooryard.

The cabin's door hung crazily by one hinge. The windows were smashed. Bottles and tin cans littered the dooryard. A battered farm truck, looking inoperable, stood in front of what appeared to have been the entrance to a root-cellar. There was no sound: dead, dead, dead, death everywhere.

"Blow the horn!" Yolande obeyed energetically, for the blast of noise would be relief from this ghastly stillness. And as she pushed the horn-disc, extremity roused the virtue in her. What were those lines about the dastard who feared to draw the sword before he blew the horn? She felt the blood pour flaming into her pallid cheeks.

Two men slouched out of the cabin doorway. The first was gross and filthy, perhaps a little older than herself, his eyes dull slits. The second man, with a long knife in his belt—why, he was the Indian who had killed the dog, burned the barn, poisoned her father, put an end to her mother: that seven-year Indian, her animated jack-o'-lantern, waiting here for their birthday party on Hallowe'en. Hadn't she foreseen this culmination all along, though burying the hideous concatenation below the level of her consciousness?

"Daddy, Daddy, I'm home, and look what I brung you for your birthday! A real lady, better'n the other 'un!" The girl prodded Yolande out of the car.

Daddy, Daddy the Seven-Year Indian, gaped incredulous at Yolande. "I know this one!" he shouted. "Honeybun, I seed you in your nightie las' time, an' I been thinkin' o' you ever since."

Be calm and cold, Yolande told herself sternly. Stepping from the station-wagon, she almost turned her ankle upon a little heap at the edge of the dooryard, beside a stray conglomerate boulder. Glancing down instinctively, she saw what the little heap consisted of: empty shotgun shells. It was as if—she had an instant vision of this, too—someone had lain half-protected behind this tall boulder, firing round after round at the cabin, furiously.

Averting her eyes from the men's stares, she paused at the front of the station-wagon and surveyed in a sweeping glance the panorama of ruin. The cabin door appeared to have been blasted from its heavy

hinges; the whole face of the log cabin was splintered and pocked from gunfire; the window-frames had been shot away; there were bullet-holes, many of them, in the hood of the truck. There had occurred such a barrage as soldiers call a "mad moment." So her memory of the shocking Pompeii item in the newspapers had not played her false. Vengeance had been wreaked in this place.

Now she met the Indian's look, eye to eye. Daddy's glare was wilder even than his daughter's, but this catlike man was no dull thing. He was animated by a kind of skipping devilish gaiety, clapping his hands and crooning as he studied his prize. He was mad only west-northwest, Yolande perceived, malignly clever after his fashion, totally corrupt. There may have been in him, once, virtue of a sort: "If thy light be darkness . . ." It was nearly extinguished now, but for years this one had worked complex mischief for mischief's sake.

Once he must have been handsome, too. And then it came to Yolande that his features were a caricature of her own. Had his claim to cousinship been true? She shuddered. Was this one also descended from the savage conjuror of the Ghost Dance? Was he her own reflection in a distorting glass?

When their eyes met, there passed between these two some impalpable understanding—between damned and blessed, brute and victim—striking both as if it were a physical blow, deep crying unto deep. "Hell," the Indian screeched, "you're jest like me!"

What remote ancestral blood, what vestige of forgotten powers, what concatenation of the immortals, what chain of fatality, linked him and her? Yolande stood unmoving, struck silent by this final confrontation. This one, somehow akin to her, had marked her family for destruction, and at this last she had been brought to him.

The Indian, too, stood there openmouthed, some sense of the marvel in this breaking upon him. But round him capered the girl: "Ain't you pleased! Daddy, ain't you pleased?"

He spoke. "Yes," said Daddy, slowly, gloatingly, "I'm pleased you fetched this one. How'd you happen on her? You fetched a real lady: she's all growed up an' ready for harvest. She's the last one of 'em left. We'll take our time with her. Cousin, set down over there."

He gestured toward a crumbling rustic wooden slat-chair with a high back, to one side of the cabin, and Yolande sank into it. Two or three feet from this chair was a picnic-table bench, with "Property of County Park System" stencilled upon it; Yolande clutched at every insignificant detail of ordinary reality, that she might not slide into the realm of her captors. Daddy, Brother, and the girl seated themselves in a jack-o'-lantern row on the nearer split-log bench of the picnic-table, facing her directly.

Brother spoke slurringly: "A real looker! You brung a real looker, Sis." He pulled a bottle from his overalls and drank deeply.

"An' she's married to a rich doc," the girl exulted. "This time the fun really pays off."

"Let's us have a purty good talk before the party starts," Daddy said. "Didn't never think I'd git you right here, Cousin Honeybun."

"First we send the doc his wife's clothes," Brother suggested.

"While we keep her, we'll keep her in the root-cellar," Daddy decided. He snatched the bottle from Brother and finished it. Then he began to chant something tipsily, in mingled corrupt English and corrupt patois. All that Yolande could make out was the refrain, "But I don' care!"

"She says she's a princess, Daddy," the girl was crying. "Is she richy! They call her the Princess o' All Lands!"

"Like the other time," Brother grunted, "if he don' pay up right after gittin' her clothes, then we send him a piece o' *her*."

In the setting sun, Yolande's three captors rocked with mirth on their bench. Yolande, in that parting light, could see her own shadow but not theirs. Woods and swamp cribbed them, as if the whole derelict clearing were a grave. There was no place to flee, unless toward the swamp at her back; and they would catch her easily, should she try.

"She don' seem as much skeered as she might, but still she's awful skeered," Daddy observed to son and daughter, as if Yolande already were only an unheeding lump of flesh. "I scairt her ma to death." His keen eyes may have detected the high flush on Yolande's cheeks; or some surviving sense within the man, akin to hers, might have

perceived the virtue churning within her. For all his bravado, the Indian shifted on the bench, not wholly at ease, hesitating to strike.

Now Yolande spoke to these three damned ones. "I don't know why it was permitted to fetch me here," she said very distinctly, her chin held high, "but possibly it's not too late for you to let me go." A welling of last-minute pity for even these three swept through her. "Perhaps you still have the choice: that may be why I was given to you—to offer you a last chance for mercy."

"Lissen to the lady talk!" Brother crowed. "Jest lissen to her! Real lady, all right, all right, but she won't be for long. Mercy! We'll titch her tricks that ain't so ladylike."

"We kin sell her car for plenty, Daddy," the girl put in. "It's 'most new."

As yet they had not tried to touch her, perhaps savoring this piquant interval before the violence, waiting for her to scream and beg, and then mastering her altogether. Yolande was resolved not to beg or scream. Or possibly her great black eyes held them off for the moment, and her strange erect dignity, sitting there before them as if invulnerable.

The Indian had ceased to laugh and croon. He was regarding Yolande intently, even soberly, as if pondering something. Clearly the son and the daughter were little more than emanations from the wizard-father, Yolande now understood. The virtue which once had flowed within this being, through labyrinthine dark channels, malignant and destructive, must not be wholly extinguished even in this terminal and phantasmal state of the Indian. What other power still could force these simulacra of mortality to cohere, after catastrophe had visited them?

Might it be that this obscene creature's vestigial consciousness misgave him, in awareness of the virtue pent within Yolande? The Indian shook himself in a feline way; then he leaped upon the picnic-table, flung himself into the air, bounded, pranced, emitted a falsetto wail, contorted his face, shivered and swayed rhythmically. It was the frenetic Ghost Dance of long ago, meant to raise the valiant from the dust. Looking upon this evocation of vanished slaughter,

Yolande knew absolutely that the fierce old prophet-conjuror's blood and virtue must run in this human horror and in herself, both.

Abruptly as he had begun his dance, the Indian ceased. Poised upon the table, his unease brushed away, he directed a long finger toward Yolande: "You was brung here for fun and money, Honeybun. I been after your people since you was born, an' now'll be the best time o' all. You an' me, we're akin, an' I'm goin' to make you know it in all the ways!" He slid supplely back from table to bench, snakelike. "Go on, Honeybun, talk if you want to: you got a few minutes left."

Were she to faint now, Yolande dreaded, she would fall into their antagonist world of madness, despair, and unavailing sorrow, everything lost. They awaited her first show of weakness. If they should spring, what would or could they do to her, on this their blood-soaked territory, on this particular immemorial evening, in this moment out of time? Would they wreak upon her everything they had done to the other woman? She did not know. She could not guess what powers were permitted them. For what they were, they retained amazing substantiality.

Yolande spoke a second time: "There are demons in all three of you, but is there anything else? Must I do what I can?"

Captors and captive sat silent for a full minute, as if in stalemate. First the girl, with a kind of puzzlement, looked away from Yolande; then Brother's eyes shifted; finally Daddy ceased to stare balefully and fingered the hilt of his sheath-knife. They had not expected this resolute confrontation; it must have been quite otherwise with the other woman. Yolande had done to them, for the moment, what one may do with dogs, through the overweening authority of the confident eye.

The tension grew; that minute seemed forever. And the vehement virtue, so long held in check, began to engulf Yolande.

They were waiting for her to leap up and run for the swamp, Yolande sensed: then they would saunter chuckling after her, catch her knee-deep in slime, her back turned to them; tear at her clothes, begin the long torment. . . .

The hysterical girl snapped the tension. "Daddy," she was squealing, "take her! Go on, Daddy, take her! I brung her for your birthday—grab her now!"

Still avoiding Yolande's eyes, the two men began to get up from the bench, heavily, as if some cautionary instinct impeded them. A second more and their hands would be upon her, which Yolande could not bear.

"I must do this!" Yolande cried to them. "Don't you know you're dead? Don't you know you've all been dead for a year? The sheriff tracked you after you took that other woman, and you shot at them out of the cabin, so the sheriff's men blew you all apart. Why are you clinging here, you poor ghosts?"

In those three faces Yolande saw a fury and a ravaging doubt such as she never had glimpsed before. Risen from the bench, the three lost ones wavered before her, hands clutching at nothingness.

"Old friend, help me now!" the Princess of All Lands prayed aloud. She raised her arms in desperate supplication.

At once some consuming burst of energy swept round the four of them, a billowing airless wind, crackling and popping, fire without light. At the core of this field of force, the Indian screamed inhumanly, "Who's come? Who's come?" For the most infinite fragment of consciousness, Yolande fancied that she glimpsed a tall fifth figure, black against greater blackness.

Then the Princess of All Lands uttered the ancient formula, shouting it into the abyss: "*Go ye cursed into the fire everlasting, which is prepared for the devil and his angels!*"

Before her the three of them writhed, speechless in agony, seared, incandescent, disintegrating. Then, the virtue ebbing out of her, Yolande fainted in her chair.

She did not know how many hours had elapsed before the cold roused her. She was slumped in the rude chair, quite alone, the moon illuminating cabin and clearing. Weak though she felt, she was able to rise.

She must be away from this place, driving through the night.

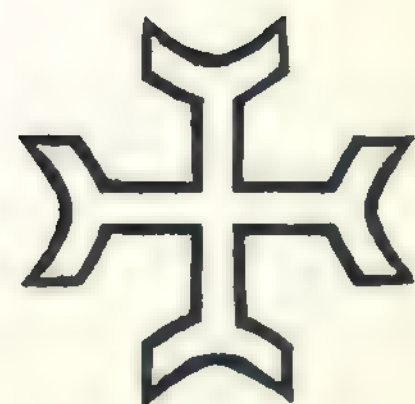
Husband and baby calling her, enough virtue remained to her for that.

She compelled herself to look at the picnic-table, even running her fingers over the planks. Nothing was to be seen upon it, nor upon the ground beneath. But an odor of burning hung about it, and here and there the wood was charred. By the virtue that was given her, she had effaced the shadow of perfect evil, lest it cling longer and descend upon others.

Only her husband could believe her; she would tell him only. Despite the frightfulness of the place, Yolande knelt in the withered grass of autumn to pray that this cup might not be thrust upon her again.

Rising, she started at something bulky which scurried into the root-cellar. But it was only a raccoon or an opossum, she knew certainly. For such was her virtue, when retributive, that whatever it dispersed in fractured atoms could not trouble time and place ever after.

THE LAST GOD'S DREAM



*Licinius lies in a marble tomb, Cato in a mean one,
And Pompey has none at all:
Who says that there are gods?*

HERE IN THE Palace of Diocletian she and Arthur stood, tired and dusty from sightseeing and shopping in the Old Town of Split—and no place to sit down! Didi Ross again surveyed the little tables of the Cafe Luxor, on the sunny pavement of the Peristyle, and despaired. Every chair occupied, the waiters were busy with Germans, Greeks, Bulgarians, English people, Scandinavians, Swiss, Rumanians, Australians, Austrians, Czechs, Egyptians, Poles, Spaniards, Hungarians, Japanese, Argentinians, Arabs, French people, Turks, Brazilians, Indians, Mexicans, many Americans, and more Yugoslavs: half the world.

A tremendous handsome bare-bellied Swedish girl, dashing past in hot pursuit of a native Yugoslav youth, nearly bowled over Didi as they waited for somebody or other to get up from a table and stroll away. It was hot in this Adriatic sunshine, and ever so noisy. Didi naturally had expected a palace to be roofed and cool, but Diocletian's Palace actually had turned out to be an enormous complex of buildings, with streets and lanes and squares, surrounded by a wall as much as seventy feet high. Long, long ago it had been converted

into a fortified town, she had found out. Really, she and Arthur must rest for a few minutes, and have some lemonade, before making their way past that black Egyptian sphinx into the cathedral.

"Arthur," she sighed, "is this the cathedral in front of us? It looks small for that. The map says 'Mausoleum.'"

Although judges are supposed to know everything, Arthur said he didn't know. He did remember, youngish judge that he was, about the Emperor Diocletian having something to do with administrative law, but it had been nearly ten years since he was at law school. At this juncture, a small party of Japanese tourists took photographs of Arthur and Didi, doubtless mistaking them for typical citizens of the People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Everything around them seemed infinitely old, except for the tourists: Didi began to wonder whether the Roman arcades of this piazza, or Peristyle, or whatever the square was called, might not tumble down upon her and Arthur without the slightest warning. So ancient, so noisy, so crowded! So many swarming people in this bewildering Palace that was a kind of open-air human beehive!

Didi turned. Some man had risen from a table in the alfresco cafe, and was bowing and speaking to her. With her husband right at her elbow, too! He was a stranger, swarthy, white-haired and white-bearded; Didi started and began to shake her head. But this stranger wore a beautiful light silk suit cut in a military fashion, and his English, his genuine English English, was exquisite.

She nudged Arthur, who probably could tell whether this stranger were just a black-marketeer. A second man, tall, with a patch over one eye, had risen now; there were two vacant chairs at their table. The white-bearded man drew back a chair for her, and his companion was offering one to Arthur. "Will you be good enough to join us?" The swarthy man's voice blended authority and suavity.

She and Arthur sank gratefully into those chairs, even if these two men did look as if they could use the score of *The Third Man* movie as background music. The white-haired man smiled blandly upon them.

"Will you take Turkish coffee?" he was saying. "I drink it passionately here in Dalmatia, for it's forever tea, tea, tea in my country." He was curiously handsome, with a beak for a nose, looking considerably like an arctic owl. His skin, contrasting with hair and beard, seemed almost unwrinkled, rather as if he had undergone plastic surgery.

"I'll have lemonade, please." Could this man be the cafe proprietor, or did he have some sinister motive in offering them free coffee and lemonade? "Are you sure we're not intruding?" Didi asked him, brushing back her blonde hair. "I'm Didi Ross, and this is my husband, Arthur." She perceived that Arthur was ill at ease with their hosts, though it must have been a relief for him to hear lovely English after days and days of Serbo-Croat jabber. The tall grave man with the neat eye-patch had spoken sharply to a waiter, who abandoned one crowded table of Eastern Europeans and took their order instead.

The white-haired gentleman offered his graceful hand to Arthur, who shook it awkwardly. And then the gentleman took Didi's hand and kissed it, as if she had been in Vienna rather than in Split. These men couldn't be Communists, anyway, not with the hand-kissing.

"I am called Manfred Arcane," their host told them. "As for intruding—why, Colonel Fuentes and I like American ladies and American judges. Besides, had these chairs remained vacant longer, we might have been invaded by a covey of those naked Swedish hoydens, whose name is legion here, and they're infinitely boring, don't you know?"

Arthur opened his eyes wide, as if he were on the bench. "Why do you say 'American *judges*,' Mr. Archance?"

"*Arcane*, if you please, Judge Ross," the swarthy man corrected him, amicably; "that's to say, 'shadowy.'" He laughed a pleasant discreet little laugh—pleasant but faintly ominous, Didi felt. "Did I hit the mark in your case? It's a necessity for me, in my line of work, to guess men's occupations and characters. Besides, when we saw that you and your delightful young consort were lacking a table. I

asked our neighbor about you." Mr. Arcane nodded toward a glum-faced Yugoslav in dark clothes, seated at the next table; that man averted his hard eyes.

"That person is a secret policeman," Arcane ran on, "set to watch us, and I perversely put him to some use. He's commendably well informed about foreigners of influence who have stayed in Split for a few days. You've a suite at the Marjan, I believe—altogether too modern and hygienic for my taste, but I suppose some travel-agent lodged you there. The government wished to put me and my friend there, but we declined. Oh, do let me present Colonel Jesus Pelayo Fuentes y Iturbide, commanding the Interracial Peace Volunteers, a body of well-disciplined men-at-arms in the service of the Hereditary President of the Commonwealth of Hamnegri."

The gentleman with the eye-patch inclined his narrow head ceremoniously, murmuring something in Spanish. Didi noticed that two fingers were missing from the Colonel's right hand.

She could tell that Arthur was surprised and annoyed, but he kept his judicial dignity. "Yes, Mr. Armond, I'm a district judge. We're from Ohio. This is the first time my wife and I have been behind the Iron Curtain."

"Alack!" Mr. Arcane raised a supple hand in mock deprecation. "Not 'Iron Curtain,' I beg of you, Judge Ross! What would the venerable President of this People's Republic think of so cruel a phrase? Our friend with the hard eyes, over there, might record your remark, and the President's sensibilities would be wounded. After all, his regime is less ferrous than Bulgaria's, Hungary's, Czechoslovakia's, not to mention Russia's."

Didi felt the color departing from her cheeks. "Oh, do you mean that it's dangerous to speak. . . ?"

Mr. Arcane laughed easily. "Why, tourists may say what they like, especially if they speak to one another in English. Besides, being with me, you and your husband may be as free and easy as you please." He beckoned to the waiter, who swiftly brought another of those little brass coffee-pots to him.

"I waited upon the President, the Marshal, at his island villa, a week ago today," Arcane resumed. "He's a very elderly personage, you know, less formidable than once—as doubtless our imperial friend Diocletian, *dominus et deus*, mellowed in his closing years, before they entombed him here." Arcane indicated with a slim forefinger the little cathedral that had been the Emperor's splendid mausoleum.

"Oh!" Didi decided that this man wasn't a confidence-man at all, but somebody important, and possibly quite powerful. "What do you do, Mr. Arcane?" Colonel Fuentes smiled narrowly.

"I commenced," said Arcane—was he really old, despite the white hair?—"as a brutal and licentious soldier. But Fortune, conspiring on my behalf, has made me a minister of state, without portfolio, in the Commonwealth of Hamnegri. I suppose that Diocletian would have styled me a pretorian prefect. Have you heard of our African realm?"

"You've got plenty of oil, I've read," Arthur put in. "And didn't you have a civil war there a few years back?"

"Sí, won by his Excellency at the Fords of the Krokul," the Colonel murmured. His English wasn't nearly so good as Mr. Arcane's.

"You're too kind, Don Pelayo," Arcane remarked. "I shouldn't have managed it without you to lead the assault." He sipped his coffee. "Though I've enjoyed my twilight victories, I've not been so favored by Jupiter as was the Emperor Diocletian, rest his soul. You've come to see Diocletian's tomb, Judge Ross and Mrs. Ross?"

"Oh, yes," said Didi, "and I wonder why they buried him in a cathedral. Didn't he persecute the Christians? The cathedral has four stars in our guidebook, but I don't know how we're going to get in. Look!"

Beyond the black sphinx and the colonnade, the portal of the octagonal cathedral was jammed with tourists, filing in and out unceasingly, being lectured at beneath the dome: tourists in the strangest getups, wearing too much or too little, tourists old, tourists young, staring uncomprehendingly, tourists who looked as if they

never had entered a church before and wore hats, biker tourists, Iron Curtain tourists, hippie tourists, showy tourists, beggarly tourists. With such a crowd, it must be sweaty inside, and impossible to see much of anything.

"That will be remedied, Mrs. Ross. I'll show you the last great imperial tomb." Arcane beckoned to the hard-faced man at the next table, who rose promptly and bent over the Minister without Portfolio — and then strode toward the tomb-cathedral.

"Quite enough time to finish your lemonade," Arcane assured her. "We'll have the Mausoleum cleared; that will take five minutes, I suppose."

Sure enough, surprised tourists were being turned away from the portal now, and some who had entered — the Jotun-like Swedish maiden of the conspicuous navel among them — were departing more speedily than they had been admitted to the church. Even the Japanese tourists, hung about with cameras, looked vexed.

Arthur was impressed. "You can have this done, Mr. Arcane, just for us? Are you big in the Communist apparatus?"

"*Au contraire.*" Arcane beamed civilly upon them. "But the President-Marshall smiles upon captains and kings of the Third World, even upon such pretorian prefects or grand viziers *de facto* as myself, fancying himself their chief and patron. Besides, he fancies still more the trade treaty that I am negotiating with his people on behalf of our President-Sultan of Hamnegri: Hamnegri's petroleum for Yugoslavia's rifles. Ah, I do believe they're ready for us now!"

He inclined his head graciously toward the hard-faced man, who had returned and was behaving like a clumsy majordomo, gesturing toward the Mausoleum-Cathedral. Didi and Arthur arose along with Arcane and the Colonel. As they strolled through the antique colonnade, Didi noticed that they were followed by two wolflike little black men who must have been seated at some other table. Also they were trailed by three more men in dark clothes, presumably Yugoslav secret policemen.

"They're Cleon and Brasidas, my guards and foster-sons," Arcane told her when she glanced at the strange little black men. "I found

them in a burnt desert village; everybody else there had been massacred — not by me. Don't you like their classical names — the mortar and the pestle of war? Aristophanes, you know. If I do say it myself, I was first in classics in my form at boarding-school. Actually, Mrs. Ross, I'm no African; I was born in Vienna, before the crash of empires, and was schooled in England. I'm Othello reversed, a European *condottiere* in Africa, now blessed for my services to the Sultan with a certain percentage of the oil-royalties of Hamnegri."

"I wish you'd tell me all about yourself," Didi replied, altogether sincerely. What a charmer this white-haired man was! "I'd rather hear about you, Mr. Arcane, than about this Emperor Diocletian. Or should I call you Mr. Arcane? Is it Your Excellency?"

"You are to call me Manfred, this being my holiday." He pointed back at the sphinx. "That's from Africa, too; Diocletian fetched it from Egypt, and it was two thousand years old when he put it here."

Didi marvelled. "I don't know much about ancient history. I still wonder why they buried a pagan emperor in a Christian cathedral."

"Ah, but it wasn't a church then, dear lady." Arcane had taken her arm and was ushering her through the ancient doorway. "All this was built near the end of the third century, a few years before the triumph of the Emperor Constantine and the Christians. Diocletian, who erected this whole complex, meant this particular wondrous building for his tomb, and here he was buried in a porphyry sarcophagus. Somebody robbed the sarcophagus fifty years later, and was put to death for it. The local Christians made it their cathedral after the Avars and the Slavs had destroyed the great city of Salona, a few miles from here, centuries later. What they did with poor Diocletian's corpse, goodness knows: they detested his memory. Mark you, he was the last pagan god. How are the mighty fallen!

*"'Licinius lies in a marble tomb, Cato in a mean one,
And Pompey has none at all:
Who says that there are gods?'"*

As if Mr. Arcane weren't bewildering enough, Didi was confused by the classical and medieval magnificence of the domed church-

tomb. Arcane was declaiming softly about progenitors of Christian baptisteries, peripteral porticos, free-standing shafts, Buvina the carver, Saint Domnius—muddling her altogether. Now he was pointing up to the frieze.

"Just here, Judge; there, Mrs. Ross—those two medallions. The man in the one is Diocletian, born to serfs a little way from here, and at his end the last emperor to be declared divine, posthumously, by the Senate of Rome. The woman in that other medallion is Prisca, his wife. Licinius took off her head, you may recall, and the head of their daughter Valeria, too, for all that a husband and a father who had ruled the world could say or do. After that, with no consolation but cultivating cabbages here in his palace garden, Diocletian could not have desired to survive."

They could make out dimly the Emperor Diocletian: an austere lean face, strong and alert, not at all like the gross persecutor that Didi had fancied. He looked rather like a judge, this Diocletian—rather like Arthur, indeed, though older. Arthur was honest and hard-working, but he did not know how to play. Mr. Arcane, on the other hand, must have been playful from boyhood up. . . .

Their host had been looking for a long time at that medallion in the frieze, almost as if he were venerating it. What was Mr. Arcane murmuring as he turned away—*dominus et deus*? "Too many wonders in a single day blur one's impressions horridly, don't you think, Judge Ross?" A scraping priest showed them out; the security-man ignored this ecclesiastical custodian, but Arcane shook his hand at parting.

Like sheep or geese, they all followed this surprising Mr. Arcane out of the Mausoleum and across the Peristyle. "Just before you is the Vestibule, the entrance to Diocletian's throne-room—that fine circular hall," he was saying. "Back of it . . . But enough of antiquities for the moment! I mean to give you dinner, if you've no objection. I can't tell you how delightful I find it to entertain two chance companions, your estimable selves, who undoubtedly are not terrorists plotting to put an end to me. And American innocence invariably tickles my fancy—if you don't mind my saying so. Colonel Fuentes

and I are carefree for a few days, a rare condition for us. He is taciturn; I'm loquacious. Do you find it unpleasant to be my audience for an evening? Last night and today I completed an experience which you might find mildly amusing: I'm full of it, and require auditors. Now we go down these stairs, but don't think that I'm carrying you off to a subterranean fate worse than death. This is our quickest way out of the Palace."

He led them into great vaults. "The Emperor's cellars, on the harbor-side. Do you know, much of these vaults under the Emperor's private apartments hasn't been excavated even yet? Fifteen centuries of rubbish—what may they find? We'd best saunter along the quay and reenter the Grad, the Old Town, but outside the Palace walls."

The whole party, black guards and security police bringing up the rear, emerged from the Palace complex through the Brass Gate, the ancient watergate. Here they were by the deep blue harbor of Split, walking along the Titova Obala, the waterside esplanade. "We go beyond that medieval tower," Arcane indicated. Colonel Fuentes was being interrogated by facts-and-figures Arthur as they strolled parallel with the Palace wall.

Manfred Arcane had taken her arm again—why, this was almost a flirtation, Didi thought, not displeased. "How can you possibly spare the time for strangers like us?" Didi asked him—and promptly feared that she had been arch. "You're being so good to Arthur and me." Was she imprudent in a foreign land? Was this man actually a kind of Grand Vizier, almost out of the *Arabian Nights*? Anyway, this Mr. Arcane scarcely could mean to drag her into one of those medieval lanes and deprive her of her virtue and her money—he must have plenty of the latter himself. She was not exactly rejoiced by the presence of those grim security-men, but there was safety in numbers, she hoped. Though Mr. Arcane seemed very nice and amusing, still he was a little—a little—well, *eerie*.

"By nature, Didi," said Arcane, "I am a *cicerone*, a tourist-guide, my dear. You don't protest at my avuncular 'Didi'? We shall get on famously. Where was I just now? Ah, yes: cruel necessity compelled me to turn first mercenary and then statesman, despite my natural

propensity for moping about ruins. Diocletian resigned the mastery of the world, when less than sixty, that he might raise cabbages in peace. Were I to retire from my exalted offices, I would hang about the Piazza San Marco, in Venice, or back there in the Peristyle of Spalato, eager to be of service, a useful tool, perhaps a bit obtuse, muttering antiquarian lore to the unwary, fixing them—especially beautiful ladies like yourself—with my glittering eye, pocketing their coins or begging their kisses, *grazie, grazie!* In fine, being cheerfully idle and secure in this old town for some days, Didi Ross, I thank the gods for this providential opportunity to bore a delicious young woman and a sober jurist with my dry-as-dust monologues.”

His melodious voice ran on, caressing, teasing, telling her the history of the Palace, and of Spalato or Split: of how twenty thousand people had crowded permanently within the walls of the former Palace, in the Darkest Age, fleeing from Avar and Slav; of how there still were thousands living within the Grad; of how perhaps the human anthill of the Palace of Diocletian was the oldest continuously inhabited domestic complex in Europe. Even Arthur seemed quite interested, now that he and the Colonel were walking alongside them. I could listen for hours on end to Manfred Arcane, Didi thought. And it appeared that she was going to do just that.

“*Aquí, Excellentissimo,*” Colonel Fuentes said to Arcane. Their party turned into a small eating-house in the maze of the Grad which lay to the west of the Palace. A neat table was found for the four of them; a longer table in a corner was provided for their retinue of secret police and savages.

“This small *trattoria* is privately owned,” Arcane instructed them, “and the powers of a Communist regime dine here, for the sake of the *cuisine bourgeois* and the decent service. You’ll find the food basically Austrian. I discovered this retreat yesterday. You’ll take Slovenian wine? May I ply you with it, smiling Didi?”

“You must have visited Split many times, Mr. Arcane—Manfred, I mean,” Didi ventured. She supposed he had been everywhere a great many times. The very ebony walking-stick that Mr. Arcane carried so jauntily apparently came from remotest Barbary—an elephant’s head

carved upon its handle, but an Arab or a Berber touch to the craftsmanship.

"Only thrice, including this present occasion. First I was brought here by my mother, when I was a small boy. No Yugoslavia existed then, nor ever had, and Spalato was Spalato still—not Split: under Austrian rule, as it had been for a century. Thousands of Viennese took their holidays on this shore. We spent a fortnight here, my pretty mother and I.

"She had been a dancer, but had acquired some antiquarian interests under my father's influence. He was a British officer, among other things, and did not marry her, but kept her well supplied annually with money. After all, in the long intervals between my father's visits, how could she have been more innocently occupied than in poking about old towns and reading a little history?

"She had been born in the mountains south of Spalato, as Diocletian had been, so many centuries earlier. Gypsy mother though my mother had, she came to take almost a kinswoman's interest in the dead Emperor, and imparted some of it to me. She made a hero of romance of the ruler who endowed the world with Giant Bureaucracy. To a small boy's fancy, the long-buried Diocletian became a Bayard, a Sidney, of the dying Empire."

"Why did she bring you here just once, then?"

"Because of a bad fright I got within the Palace walls, I fancy. It was no great matter, but she was tender with me. How fortunate that she doesn't know of how I have supped long on horrors, in three continents, since she died! The African terrors have been the worst; I have been a kind of mayor of the palace in one of the more turbulent African countries since a year or two after the Second World War ended. But why conjure up raw head and bloody bones in this tranquil *trattoria*? For me, as for Diocletian, the object of war is peace."

He drained his glass of wine and filled it again, and filled Didi's too. "Yes, I was frightened the first time I visited Spalato, and I nearly ended my days here on the second occasion."

"I'm so glad you didn't," said Didi. She was conscious of blushing a

little. This man, old enough to be her grandfather, talking of wars that had ended before she had been born, had what they called—*charisma*, that was it. And he was timeless.

"Three or four times, later, I was still closer to extinction," Manfred Arcane added, "but the devil protects his own. You seem to like this wine, Didi. That second visit came long later, when the Italians held this port during the Second World War. In those days I was a double agent—but don't look so shocked, young lady, without knowing my motives. Something very startling indeed happened to me that second time. I don't suppose you'd care to hear about it. Shall we begin dinner with a soup? Oh, you *would* care to hear—really?"

Colonel Fuentes, glancing toward the longer table, said something in Spanish to his superior, *sotto voce*.

"Ah, that's of no consequence, Don Pelayo," Arcane told him, in English. "Let the police agents listen! They'll not apprehend me, not even my moral. As for what I was then—why, the President-Marshall doubtless would promulgate a general act of oblivion, for the sake of the precious treaty I am negotiating with him. Do you fancy, old friend, that I'm senile? Not yet, not yet, even though you find me in my anecdotage."

He patted Didi's hand, not surreptitiously, and laid his other hand on Arthur's arm. "This is a longish tale, and I don't expect you to believe it, you American materialists. With your permission, Judge? With your gracious permission, Didi? You both must be impatient already at my garrulity, my pert loquacity. But you do conceal your exasperation so mercifully! Are all your fellow-citizens of the sovereign state of Ohio so courteous? Well, then, if you insist, and promise that you'll not be frightened. . . ." Arcane drew an ugly-looking cigar, rather like a small torpedo, from an elegant leather case.

"You'll not mind my lighting this, Mrs. Ross—Didi? Honor bright? Why, you're as kind as you are lovely. Perhaps Diocletian's high-minded daughter Valeria was like you. The world fell to pieces after Diocletian abdicated—he had kept the lid upon chaos for more than

twenty years — and even Valeria wasn't spared, and even that masterful father, Master and God, couldn't save her.

"I have taken you outside the Palace proper to offer you this True Narration of mine, because even now I am uneasy at talking of my curious experience within those ghostly precincts. The stones cry out, the walls have ears — and I don't refer to the electronic devices of our thin-lipped companions at the other table."

He addressed Arthur. "One of these Burma cheroots for you, Judge Ross? Your first? Permit me to light it. It won't be your last: I'll have a box or two posted to you, if you'll leave me your card, and if you don't suspect me of endeavoring to corrupt the bench."

Didi sat at his right hand. As Arcane's flow of talk grew more intense, she edged closer and closer to this marvellous man, until she found herself nearly nose to nose with Mr. Arcane. She understood now what was meant by the phrase "hanging on his words."

"Taste your wine, friends," Arcane had begun, "settle well into your chairs, await your soup — they take an unholy time in this house to cook anything, I suspect — and I will lull you into somnolence. Don Pelayo, you never have heard this particular misadventure of mine." Under his heavy and tufted white eyebrows, Arcane's pupils seemed to dilate as night descended upon the Grad of Split.

"What with my childhood being spent in Vienna," Arcane observed, "I came to Alice, her Wonderland, and her Looking-Glass later than I suppose you did, Arthur and Didi. One encounter of Alice impressed me when first I read Carroll at my English school, and it has an especial significance for me now. I mean the Red King's dream. The Red King snores, and Alice is told that should he wake, she and everything else would vanish, annihilated: for Alice, Tweedledum, and Tweedledee are figments of the King's dream. Does that notion terrify you? It jolly well terrifies me. It's worse than solipsism, to which I never was addicted. To be nothing better than a figure of somebody else's nocturnal fancy, at the mercy of the vagrant imagination of a dreaming god, perhaps . . . what horror! 'If that there King was to wake,' says Tweedledum, 'you'd go out—

bang!—just like a candle!’ Alice replies that she wouldn’t. Yet on a certain occasion I didn’t share Alice’s confidence.”

Arcane paused to knock ash from his cheroot. “Here in Spalato, thirty-five years ago, I came upon such an omnipotent dreamer—just thirty-five years ago last night. And last night I endeavored to look him up again, but failed. I suspect that he still dreams, for all that.”

“*La vida es sueño, y los sueños sueños son,*” Colonel Fuentes suggested sibilantly.

“My old comrade knows his Calderón,” Arcane told the Judge and Didi. “Yes, ‘life is a dream, and dreams are dreams’—though you do well to ignore that insight when there’s shooting to be done, Don Pelayo. Well, my particular dreamer was no Sleeping Beauty. But I must bore you with a prologue, for my curious experience with the grand dreamer commenced when I first stayed in this city.

“It was 1913 when my mother brought me here for a holiday—to a town more Austrian and Italian in tone, then, than it was Croatian. My mother was parsimonious, though well supplied with money every year. She took with us from Vienna a single servant-girl, and engaged rooms at a small hotel within the walls of the Palace. That hotel stands still. It must have been a merchant-noble’s house in the beginning, a rambling old place, built and altered over the centuries, growing like a saprophyte out of the wreck of one of Diocletian’s structures. At least one of its walls must be a fourth-century Roman wall of limestone. I have slept there, after a fashion, for the past three nights, and will sleep there again tonight.

“Our rooms, in 1913, before those shots at Sarajevo ushered in our time of troubles, were along a corridor within a confused mass of building: a warren of a place, that hotel, the whole interior plastered over with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century decor. Because already I was an adventurous and willful boy, my mother put me into the biggish room at the very end of that hallway: I would have to pass her door, and our maid’s, if I ventured upon a solitary expedition at some eccentric hour.

“My room, irregular in shape, was sparsely furnished with solid old

pieces. It had only one window, and that looking through bars upon a tiny courtyard, scarcely more than a well, far below. The innkeeper seemed hesitant to assign that particular room to us; on being pressed, he said that some guests had not slept soundly there. Doubtless perceiving in Mother a superior sort of patron, he did not wish to allow her any cause for complaint. She disregarded his murmurs: precisely because that room was almost a prison, with no escape except past her own more cheerful chamber, she found it a very good place to lodge a very naughty boy.

"At our house in the Vienna Woods, I had been given to nocturnal rambles about the premises, because I am one of that small minority of the human species who are sleepest at three in the afternoon but very wide awake indeed at three in the morning. Not meaning to have me stroll the Grad in the small hours, she locked me into my room after our supper—having had the hotel servants provide a tray of refreshments for me, on the chance that I might wake in the night and be hungry. I suffer from total recall: I am quite sure that upon the tray were some pieces of cold chicken on a bed of lettuce, two large Dalmatian figs, and three or four bonbons.

"But I digress. I did wake that first night in the little hotel, and at three o'clock. I woke up sharp, with a small boy's intuition of something being wrong. I was famished, ravenous, hungrier than ever before in my short life. Yet I did not reach at once for my tray. For it seemed to me as if someone or something else were in my room, or perhaps about to enter.

"The furniture did not include an *armoire*. Instead—unusual at that time and in this country—a kind of closet was set into one wall, draperies concealing it. The servants had hung or lain my clothes within that recess. It seemed to my puerile imagination that the uncanny element I sensed somehow emanated from that veiled closet.

"I had acquired early the habit, so useful later in life, of confronting danger directly, before the peril might undo one's resolution. So I threw off my feather-comforter, leaped from my bed, dashed at the recess, and thrust aside its draperies.

"Except for hooks, shelves, and my clothes, the recess was empty. But set into the rear wall of this closet was a battered classical doorway of stone, still very handsome in its decrepitude, fluted and ornamented. Had I been older, I would have recognized the carving as Roman. This doorway was closed by a massive ancient wooden door, studded with brass, probably medieval; presumably this led, or had led, into another suite of apartments—perhaps into another building which had a common wall with the hotel, for such forgotten connections are common enough in this beehive of a town, where for many centuries thousands of townsfolk were crowded together insufferably out of dread of Slav or Turk. This door was secured on my side of it by rusty iron bolts, shot home into the stonework.

"Being a mischievous boy, of course at once I attempted to draw the bolts—despite the oppressive or menacing atmosphere of the room, strongest here in this tall recess, which already had beset me. The bolts withstood my young fingers. Perhaps the door had settled immovably into place through many generations of disuse.

"I gave up the endeavor. Perfect hunger, like perfect love, casts out fear. Returning to my bedside, I gobbled down the chicken, the lettuce, the figs, the bonbons. Yet still I remained ferociously, intolerably hungry.

"And still the room was horrid, though clean and decently white-washed. I could not get out the window, fortunately for me—the distance to the ground being considerable. I was so frightened in my solitude that I did a shameful thing: I pounded upon the locked bedroom door and screamed for my mother. She heard me after two or three minutes, rescued me, and let me into her own bed for the rest of the night. I was not troubled nocturnally for the rest of our fortnight in Spalato."

Even though the anecdote seemed pointless, Didi was fascinated. "Little kids get moods like that," said Arthur.

The soup had been served, and Arcane consumed his speedily, as if the hunger of 1913 still were upon him. Then he took a different tack.

"Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus, 'son of gods and creator of

gods,' born plain Diocles the son of a serf or a slave, built nobly," he declared. "The Palace is only the most enduring of his creations in stone. The first thing one sees in Rome, if one arrives by train, is the Baths of Diocletian—gigantic even in their disintegration, still housing churches, convents, museums, everything but bathers. Do you know that the Mausoleum, to which I took you just now, is the best-preserved work of antiquity? After Diocletian, form began to decay: consider the Arch of Constantine, and that monstrous stone head of Constantine in a courtyard on the Capitoline—how rapid a descent of art!"

"Why did he persecute the Christians?" Didi asked.

"Nobody knows, my dear. He didn't mean to shed their blood: Galerius, Valeria's fierce husband, did that. I suppose his urgent need for unity in the empire which he had re-created was his underlying motive. Without him, *Romanitas* would have been destroyed in the third century, rather than the sixth. He was a just man, imaginative, more merciful than most, a grand general, a great administrator. In the reconstituted Empire, everything depended upon loyalty to the person of the Emperor, and the Christians preferred one other loyalty above that—even the Christian nobles of the complex bureaucracy that Diocletian had organized.

"Or he may have been misled by the intriguing courtiers about him: no one knew better than Diocletian the corruption of imperial courts. It's quite the same nowadays in the 'emergent nations,' I assure you. What was it that Diocletian told a friend? It's in Vopiscus somewhere. Yes, I have it now; I do pride myself upon my memory.

"'How often is it the interest of four or five ministers to combine together to deceive their sovereign,' Diocletian said. 'Secluded from mankind by his exalted dignity, the truth is concealed from his knowledge; he can see only with their eyes, he hears nothing but their misrepresentations. He confers the most important offices upon vice and weakness, and disgraces the most virtuous and deserving among his subjects. By such infamous arts, the best and wisest princes are sold to the venal corruption of their courtiers.'"

Arcane took a coin from his pocket and let his fingers play with it.

"I have quoted those sentences more than once to His Sublimity Achmet ben Ali, Hereditary President of Hamnegri and Sultan in Kalidu; but they are words upon the wind. I also, after all, am one of those intriguing ministers to the isolated great. Of course you have no such problems in your democratic America, Judge Ross—or have you?"

Arthur opened his mouth to say something, but already Arcane had resumed.

"Though a Papist myself, I say that the Christian writers of Constantine's time grossly libelled old Diocletian, and his wife Prisca too. They even accused him of cowardice at the end—of 'procuring his own death.' In reality he was utterly fearless. He did what no emperor before him had dared to essay: having ridden the tiger for more than twenty years, he dismounted. Having given peace to all the provinces, from Britain to Syria, he relinquished authority to his subordinates, settled in this Palace, grew cabbages, and prayed to the gods.

"Diocletian was a pious man, in the old Roman sense of that word, a champion of worship, of loyalty, of family, of private property. Nor was he vain. The diadem with pearls that he wore, the buskins, the imperial purple robes, were not effeminate affectations. Not sycophancy for himself, but reverence for the office of emperor, were their purpose. They were symbols of order, justice, peace; they meant that the emperor was more than a rude demagogic master of soldiers—even though Diocletian himself had been little more than that when he took power and beat back the barbarians."

"But didn't he say he was a god?" Didi was proud of her little learning. "That wasn't very modest."

"The last god of the classical world?" Arcane nodded. "He was apotheosized by the Senate after his death: the last man-created god. And even during his life, on his coins—he reformed the currency prudently—he was called *dominus et deus*, Master and God. What Diocletian himself understood by this glorification, I take it, was that Jupiter, lord god of hosts, had imparted to his humble and obscure

servant Diocles some little spark of divinity, that he might uphold Rome in an hour of dreadful need. How else to account for Diocletian's great gifts, and his astounding successes—the lowness of the man's origins considered? In my own small way, I am tempted to embrace Diocletian's theory of inspiration—being, as I am, the bastard son of a half-gypsy dancer."

Arcane lit a second cheroot. "Diocletian was true to such light as was given him. The high old Roman virtue was reborn in him. In religion, he may have been a Mithraist at bottom; we know that he dedicated the Temple of Mithra at Carnuntum, on the Danube, and Mithraism was the soldier's faith then. Mithra's votaries may have pushed him into his persecution of the Christians: because of their close similarities, Mithraists and Christians hated each other, and the Christians took their retribution in Constantine's reign. However that may be, the Christian zealots of the fourth century shouted that Diocletian must burn eternally for his wickedness. In those times no one talked of merciful salvation on the ground of 'invincible ignorance.'"

"You said that his wife and daughter were beheaded, and he couldn't stop it," Didi interjected. "So how much of a god was he?"

"That, Didi, came a decade after Diocletian's abdication, and it was done by one of the hard men upon whom his imperial powers had devolved. 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' That was true of Diocletian's successors, though not of himself. The heirs to his power made certain that the heirs of Diocletian's body were extirpated.

"And when Constantine the Great had eliminated most rivals, he determined to eradicate the weary old man in the Palace near Salona—though Constantine's family owed everything to Diocletian. Constantine commanded Diocletian to attend a wedding at Milan. The old emperor knew that he never would be permitted to return to this Palace alive, and so he declined the invitation. Then Constantine and Licinius—the one who had murdered Diocletian's wife and daughter—sent him menacing letters. He was sixty-eight years old,

and there was nowhere he could turn—not in this world, of which he had been absolute master. The panegyrists of Constantine say that Diocletian, craven at the end, had himself killed in his own house. I know that he died most honorably, as an antique hero should—better even than did Cato of Utica.”

Didi was being taught more than she needed to know about the Emperor Diocletian, enthralling though this antiquary from Africa was. “But you were going to tell us about what happened to you in Split during World War II.” Was she being rude?

Arcane patted her hand again. “Forgive the ramblings of an ancient, child of America: I must seem as old to you as Diocletian himself; now don’t protest—I know you think me totally decrepit, a dotard, a eunuch, a dolt. You weren’t born when the second episode of my True Narration came to pass. Let me plead that what I’ve just told you isn’t altogether irrelevant to my interminable yarn. If you’ll forgive me—you Americans and your passion for ‘relevance’! Relevance is to truth as price is to real worth. Now eat your veal before it’s quite cold, and I’ll approach the climax.”

He put down beside his plate the coin with which he had been playing as he talked, and took up knife and fork. “Do you know, every one of us has too much ego in his cosmos. Here I fill my belly before tearing a passion to tatters. Wasn’t it your President John Adams who said that every man must have first his dinner and then his girl? Meanwhile, as we feast and couple, our neighbors expire in agony—girl lost, dinner wanting. How right Augustine was about our universal corruption! Do try those lentils—not half bad, if one adds a little salt.”

The restaurant was full of people now, nearly all of them Yugoslavs, Didi noticed. Mr. Arcane had sent more bottles of wine to those secret police in the corner. In the lane outside, the evening crowd laughed and bantered and quarrelled, as crowds had done here since Diocletian’s death.

“Don’t you think we ought to get back to our hotel?” Arthur whispered to her.

“No!” said Didi.

Having finished his *pièce de résistance*, Manfred Arcane called for finger-bowls. "I demand such amenities on principle in Marxist lands, along with *cuisine bourgeois*," he told Didi. "It's a pity you're travelling by car: motor-vessel along the Dalmatian shore is ever so much more pleasant. Do you know, Colonel Fuentes and I have been voyaging *first-class*, quite comfortably, on a Communist ship called the *Proletarska*—the female proletarian? All animals are equal, remember, but some are more equal than others. I suppose you've heard enough and to spare of my memories. What shall we choose for dessert? They compound a reasonably appetizing chocolate soufflé here, I'm told."

"Oh, please, please, go on with the story!" Didi insisted. "I just adore the way you talk, Manfred. It makes me feel like a little girl hearing the *Arabian Nights* for the first time."

"And I adore you in turn, Didi Ross—that is, with your generous permission, Judge Ross. I'm sure you're tired, Arthur: hadn't we best consume some brandy and then escort you back to the glittering splendors of the Hotel Marjan?"

"Don't you dare!" Didi cried. "Arthur will get his second wind after coffee." Too late, it occurred to her that she shouldn't have spoken quite so forcefully. Manfred had refilled her wine-glass several times.

"Then once more into the breach, dear friends." Arcane ordered the soufflé all round, not forgetting the black henchmen and the security-men. "How bored those unfortunate tight-lipped chaps must be! But when duty whispers low, *Thou must*, the flic replies, *I can*. I shall keep them up to all hours, guarding me and spying upon me.

"So be it, good companions. My second expedition to Spalato—Split, if you must—was far more lively than my first, and just thirty years later. Where had I been meanwhile? Why, having finished school in England, and having idled about Vienna, I was commissioned in the cavalry of a native prince in India; tired of that after some years; took a house in Spain, having plenty of money, thanks to my mother's frugality and the munificence of my father on the wrong side of the blanket—who never visited us after 1914. Presently the Civil War engulfed me at Toledo, and I fought, willy-nilly, on the

illiberal side. Then I lived in Rome for a time, fell in love with a countess. . . .”

“Did you marry her?” Didi wanted that story, too. The wine had made her forget, for a moment, that the countess might have had a count-husband already.

Arcane's dark ageless face ceased to be bland and turned impassive. “No, my dear lady. She died in torment, a prisoner, a saint. In hope of ransoming her life, I turned double agent in Italy and Germany and other lands, during the War. No occupation for a gentleman, you may be thinking? Too true. But then, like dear Daisy Ashford's Mr. Salteena, I am not quite a gentleman, though you would hardly notice—or would you?

“It was as double agent, with a Spanish passport and a quasi-consular commission from the Spanish government, that I arrived in Spalato in 1943. An Italian garrison, not driven out until two years later, held this city. It would take too long for me to describe the secret business I was about, or how that business had some connection with my private motive.

“It was a risky errand for me, my Machiavellian notoriety having preceded me in certain knowledgeable quarters. The Italian administration suspected me; so did Tito's people, underground in Spalato, fancying that I was a courier to the Chetniks; while the Chetnik agents entertained grave doubts of my reliability, the German representatives in Spalato were not at all sure whether I was on their side, and the Croatian Ustachi wondered if I sympathized with the Serbs. My Spanish papers and connection were some protection against prompt open arrest—but not against being spirited away secretly to one brutal interrogation-chamber or another. What game I really was playing I may tell you another time, Didi—and of course you, too, Arthur—if you are at leisure.

“The Spanish consul feared to put me up, and the city was jammed with refugees and with Italian troops, many of the officers quartered upon the hotels. No room at any inn, no pillow where a self-respecting spy might lay his weary head! A young woman strolling the quays kindly invited me to share her lodging, for a reasonable

fee; but I had come to spy out the nakedness of the land, not the nakedness of its women. Then I recalled the name, and the street, of the quaint hotel where Mother and I had stayed three decades before — by coincidence, three decades to the very day.

"The clerk at the counter protested that he had no room at all. But I jingled in my hand some gold pieces — nobody desiring inflated bank-notes then — and said to him, 'There always is a bed somewhere, if in a room not wholly desirable. May I have that biggish room at the end of the corridor on the upper floor — at a premium?' I laid my gold on the counter.

"The clerk started. 'It does happen to be empty tonight, sir,' he confessed. I told him to have me shown up.

"Except for the whitewash having turned dingy, that room was unaltered. Entrenched within, I looked to the door-fastenings, which seemed insufficient. So I propped a chair against the knob, and reinforced it with a heavy chest. I was exhausted from my long and hazardous trip all the way from Barcelona. I slipped my short pistol under my pillow, thrust my long knife into the money-belt I always wore about my waist, and went to sleep.

"As if time had had a stop, I woke at three in the morning, filled with dread as I had been thirty years earlier. How furiously hungry I was — and no chicken, no figs, no bonbons this night! In my diverse shadowy occupations, steady nerves are necessary. But I was all on edge, without ascertainable cause except the general recklessness of my mission. It was chilly and damp; I rose, put on my dressing-gown. . . .

"Only just in time. For at that moment I heard masculine whispers outside my door, and a key inserted in the lock; the knob was turned cautiously.

"I suppose you know that both our hard-faced companions at that long table, and practiced terrorists, prefer to take captives in the small hours, when the victims are befuddled by sleep. Mid-afternoon, on the other hand, is a kind of time-sanctuary for the hunted. I had learned not to parley with gentlemen of that kidney, at that fatal hour of three o' the morning, when most dying people give up the

ghost. In such circumstances, the best recourse is to flee incontinent, forsaking goods and chattels.

"There remained one forlorn hope — that stubborn old door at the back of the recess. I did not even snatch up my pistol, which would have been useless against such odds in a cul-de-sac. I bounded for those closet draperies as the men outside forced my door and stumbled in the dark over chair and chest. My fingers found the doorbolts that had defied me thirty years before. Concealed behind the draperies, I tugged at those bolts with bleeding fingers. I heard someone lurch against my bed. One bolt gave, and I was crouched down fighting with the lower bolt when the curtains were ripped away and men groped in the blackness for me.

"Something struck my head. But the second bolt had yielded. I forced the creaking disused door part of the way open. Another bludgeon-blow fell upon me. Writhing snakelike, I crept through. . . ."

"They didn't catch you, Manfred!" Didi squealed. Even Arthur, having gained that second wind of his, was listening openmouthed. "Santiago de Compostela!" Colonel Fuentes muttered.

Arcane waited for them to subside. "What followed is difficult to express in words," he sighed in his musical voice. "Coffee now? Plum brandy? A pale liqueur for you, blonde Didi?"

Except for their party, the restaurant had nearly emptied by this time, and the two waiters had on their faces that expression of Stoic apathy not uncommonly encountered in Dalmatia, as in Spain — perhaps a legacy from centuries of feud and hatred, every man's hand against every other man's. They regarded the remaining diners unsmilingly.

"We must appease these proletarian comrades of the private sector," Arcane remarked. Colonel Fuentes produced several hundred-franc Swiss bank-notes — as if his superior owned all the money in the world except fourteen francs — and handed them to the waiters. "Let us not be disturbed," Arcane told them — at least that was what Didi surmised he must be saying in Serbo-Croat — and the waiters brightened perceptibly. The coffee, the brandy, the liqueurs were produced, and their tables were left in peace.

"Though earth be mixed with fire," Arcane confided to Didi, "one constant is not corrupted by rust or moth: the generous gratuity. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end, the tickling of the palm works all manner of wonders." What an amusing fantastic this cosmopolite was — Austrian-cum-Englishman-cum-Spaniard-cum-Italian-cum-African!

Didi tugged at his silken lapel; she would have liked to have tugged at his silky beard — this old-young tormentor's, playfully teasing. "Go on, go on, please, pretty please! What was behind that old door?"

"Did Guinevere bully Launcelot thus — begging your indulgence, Arthur? I'll tell the tale out, if you'll promise not to choke me, dearest lady. What happened is infinitely troublesome to account for."

Arcane sipped his brandy, then his coffee. The four police agents, and even the two scarred black men, were listening unabashedly. Everyone else, the very waiters, had departed. It had grown almost cold and quite silent in the room, except for the urbane voice of the subtle Minister without Portfolio.

"Beyond that door I stumbled upon a short flight of brick steps," Arcane said. "I reeled up them. Blood was trickling thickly down my head and neck.

"At the top of the steps was a second door — a huge one, of bronze. Flinging my weight upon it, I made it yield. I slipped through, and it swung shut soundlessly behind me. On the far side of that door hung a kind of bronze bar, attached somehow to the door itself. I fixed that bar in place, fumbling in my haste. To my astonishment, there came no noise of pursuit.

"I was horribly giddy and distraught. Even so, the marvellous beauty of the high, long room in which I found myself still is fixed in my mind's eye. The tessellated pavement under my bare feet was all one vast colored mosaic. From floor to ceiling, elaborate frescoes and more mosaics covered the walls. There was no interior illumination, but light came from several small windows high up, and from skylights of a sort, two or three of them, set into the roof.

"I was barefoot, wearing only robe and pyjamas, armed only with the sheath-knife thrust into my money-belt. I was wounded, and friendless in a strange town. Even so, for a moment I was lost in wonder at the classical perfection of this secret place.

"And this salon was well furnished, with what I took for superb copies of the Roman couches, tables, and chairs that one sees in the classical mosaics and frescoes. How can I give you some concept of their curious richness? Do you know your New York Metropolitan Museum? And perhaps the Roman rooms to the left, as one enters, on the principal floor? Good! Then you have seen the sort of thing I found that night.

"So far as I could reflect at all in this moment of peril, I took it that some magnificent virtuoso of Spalato must have commissioned or collected these reproductions, and have had floor and walls decorated, at unthinkable expense, in antique fashion. The building itself, butting against the old hotel, must be one of several medieval or renaissance family palaces—most of them slums now—which survive in the Grad.

"But I never had imagined that such a gem of mock-antiquity had existed anywhere in Dalmatia. The nearest thing to it that I have seen anywhere is on the Thames, of all situations—Syon House, whose interiors Robert Adam fitted up in Roman style for the Percys in the eighteenth century, with columns fished from the bed of the Tiber, mosaics transported from Roman ruins, all those priceless fragments he gathered. It was Adam, don't you know, who rediscovered Diocletian's Palace for the eighteenth-century world of scholarship, taste, and fashion, and made his splendid drawings of the Palace, and tried to excavate Diocletian's cellars—and was expelled from Spalato by the Venetians, who thought him a spy! But of course I wasn't thinking about that remarkable Scot Robert Adam, architect, of Kirkcaldy, as I stood dazed and bloody in this enchanted great hall.

"There was no one in the immense shadowy room—not surprising, the hour considered. It was totally silent. At any moment my adversaries might seize me. I had no notion of whether the occupants of

this palace could, or would, shelter me from the gang that had burst into my hotel room.

"My head ached hideously, yet my stomach ached worse. The gnawing ravenousness which had oppressed me in the hotel, thirty years earlier and again this violent night, was inexpressibly worse here in this salon. I had not known that living man ever could be so hungry as I was at that moment — and when in imminent danger of capture or death, too! Had there been a blessed bowl of fruit in this room, I would have devoured it all like a wolf, right then, regardless of the hounds on my heels. But there was nothing at all to eat, so far as I could tell.

"I must get out of this place, as much to satisfy my appetite as to evade killers! I couldn't go back the way I had come, of course; but two massive marble doorways, with double doors of bronze, stood along the wall to my right. I dashed at the first of them. The handles or massive knobs had been removed from the inner side of those doors. Heedless of risk, I shook the doors, pried at them: they would not stir, and perhaps they had been fastened immovably on their outer sides. I scurried to the second doorway — and was frustrated again. This place was like a sealed tomb.

"During the few moments I had spent in this precarious sanctuary, a storm had begun to rise over the Adriatic — bellows and crashes of thunder, gigantic flashes of lightning, though no rain seemed to be falling yet. By one bright thunderbolt, I made out an open doorway in the further wall of the sala; presumably it led to other apartments. I passed through that doorway.

"On the right-hand side of the corridor, several beautiful closed doors were visible; I was able to open none of them. To my left was a long doorless wall, covered with mosaics, probably parallel with the harbor; the windows were too high up for me to glance out. I trotted stealthily the length of that corridor, and entered another large room.

"Here stood two marble statues, painted in part, on pedestals: both were twice life-size. I had seen no picture of either of them before, and their condition was so perfect that they must be success-

ful modern imitations of classical sculpture, carved in the finest stone. One figure unmistakably was a tremendous Jupiter. The other, with a Phrygian cap and a knife in his hand, must be a representation of the god Mithra.

"I had no leisure to admire them. Beyond the images of the gods was yet another open doorway. Once I passed through that, I smelt the faint odor of burning oil. To my right was a doorway, apparently of porphyry, with a curtain hanging across it; and from behind that curtain came a slight glimmer of lamplight.

"In such a house as this, a half-naked intruder might be turned over to the police, but it was improbable that he should be beaten, tortured, or slain instantly. I parted the curtains, and could make out a silver lamp of the antique form burning on a marble table, but nothing else except some pieces of furniture. Might there be something to eat in this room? I went in.

"There came a faint suppressed groan which made me forget aching head and aching belly. Then a low masculine voice spoke, a touch of sardonic humor in it:

*"'Pastor, arator, eques, pavi, colui, superavi
'Capras, rus, hostes, fronde, ligone, manu.'"*

Didi gripped Manfred Arcane's wrist, sharply, at this point. "Oh! What did that mean!"

The old adventurer had spoken almost in a trance; at Didi's clutch, he shook his white head as if to clear it. "Forgive me, I had forgotten the decay of Latin in Ohio," he said, tartly, rubbing his wrist - which Didi's long nails had scratched. "But why should I blame you? I did not recognize the lines myself, though they had something Virgilian in them. I did catch the meaning, which runs much like this:

*"'As shepherd, ploughman, knight, I've pastured, tilled, subdued
'Herds, farms, and enemies, with herbage, hoe, and arms.'"*

Arcane was pale. He seemed to take hold upon himself, and continued.

"Beyond the silver lamp was a couch; and on that couch a tall man was lying, a purple mantle thrown over him. He did not rise; soon I found that he could not. He spoke in Latin. As I mentioned to you, I was a tolerable scholar in that language once. Yet I found difficulty in following him—not only because he spoke feebly, but because the pronunciation and some of his words were strange to me.

"How shall I put it? Why, suppose you were a Bantu who had studied painstakingly the plays of Shakespeare, but no other English. And suppose you abruptly found yourself confronted by an elderly general of the twentieth century, from San Francisco, speaking colloquial American. How well would you, the Bantu, understand the general? I had been schooled in Cicero, and I was hearing the Latin of a time as remote from Cicero as our time is remote from Shakespeare.

"I stood there frozen. The man upon the couch murmured in his exhaustion and delirium, 'I have raised legions and cabbages. Have you been sent by Constantine and Licinius to strangle me? It is late for that.'

"Another fierce flash of lightning showed me his face, ghastly thin and pallid, the face of a man starved and dying. I saw the broad forehead, the long prominent nose, the weary eyes, the lined cheeks, the severe mouth, the strong chin. I knew him.

"I flung myself down upon the mosaic pavement beside the couch. 'Dominus!' I gasped."

Arcane stroked his beard meditatively, paused, resumed with an effort. "I suppose I was in ecstasy. This word 'ecstasy' signifies 'sensual joy' to nearly everybody nowadays: ours is a corrupt time, with corrupt meanings. Actually, 'ecstasy' means to be extended, transported out of one's self. I was transported out of time and space, out of the body, out of the sensual world. I was overwhelmed with feeling, yet not terrified. I was beyond fear.

"'Ah, you are a friend then, a foolish friend, though I do not know your face,' said the feeble voice with its undertone of high authority. 'I think that you are a soldier. Have you come to tempt me? It is late for that also. I shall eat nothing, and in a little time I shall be spirit

only. I no longer even desire a morsel of bread, nor an olive, nor could I contain them. Constantine and Licinius shall not take me. I have failed in living; I shall not fail in dying.'

"'Imperator!' I whispered.

"'Rise up, foolish friend,' said Diocletian.

"I contrived somehow to stand. His eyes must have been keen enough still, for all his extreme debility.

"'I see that you are wounded, friend,' the Emperor went on. 'I think that you are dying, as I am.' His slow voice was like a distant gong. 'Do you come to me for justice? I could not do justice upon Licinius for murdering Prisca and Valeria. What could I do for you? Justice also is dying in this world. You and I must appeal to the God of All, for only with him justice abides.'

"Rain had begun to patter in at a high window. The blue lightning outside blazed in sheets now, near at hand. The Emperor was saying something more, but thunder drowned his words. In my ecstasy I was not denied memory.

"Staring at the man upon the couch, I remembered how the Emperor Carinus, on campaign against the Persians, had been struck by lightning in his litter; and how to Carinus's power there had succeeded one of his bodyguards—Diocles, or Diocletian. I remembered in that icy moment, too, that when Diocletian had published his edict against the Christians, lightning twice had struck his palace at Nicomedia, nearly destroying it, burning his bedchamber. And Diocletian had taken to himself the divine name of Jove, Jupiter of the thunderbolts, proclaiming himself one predestined to participate in Jupiter's eternal nature. Amidst strokes of lightning Diocletian had lived, and now he was expiring among them.

"Despite the frightful electrical storm then striking about the Palace, the starved master of the world did not shudder or start. His lips moved, and I bent close to him.

"'Where are we, friend?' he sighed. 'Are we between Heaven and Earth, between time and eternity? It seems to me that I have been dreaming here age upon age.' He muttered then some sentences I

could not follow, closed his eyes, slowly opened them again, spoke once more.

"'Fasting to death here, I have dreamed of all times and all lands. I have dreamed of all follies and vanities. I have dreamed of my Prisca and my Valeria, who knew how to live and to die with honor. I have dreamed of Maximian, Galerius, Constantius Chlorus, with whom I shared the burden of empire—all gone down to death before me.'

"With a forefinger he could only just move, he beckoned to me to come closer still. 'Are you a phantom, friend? Your face is strange to me. Was everything always dream? How can you answer me, if you are but a creature of my long dream. Did I summon you, ghost calling to ghost? You cannot have entered as fleshly man enters, for I have sealed the doors. When I cease to dream, will you cease to be? Am I to dream in this room until the sun and all the stars grow cold, until the gods themselves are dead? Father Jove, give me a sign!'

"Then the lightning came in at a high window, destroying all shadow, revealing mercilessly the Emperor's face of agony. A tremendous sparkling fireball, particles innumerable, all at war with one another, ran frenziedly about the chamber, spitting, consuming, and struck Diocletian there on the couch. Amid that indescribable electrical blaze, I fell, and the ecstasy was ended."

Didi gazed stupefied at Manfred Arcane. "That was quite a dream!" Arthur offered. Colonel Fuentes was crossing himself.

"A dream?" Arcane shook his head. "An experience. True, my body did not pass through that old door. Nor did I awake in the hotel. After some days, I woke in a military hospital, and remained there a good deal longer. I wouldn't have survived, had it not been for the chance, or providential circumstance, that when I was carried to the hospital with a broken skull I was recognized by an Italian military surgeon who had known me in Rome. He patched me up skillfully. Even so, after being deported from Dalmatia, I had to lie resting for three months in my house at Toledo, while the world tore itself to pieces."

"Then those men actually did break into your room?" Didi demanded. "And you didn't get away?"

"Precisely. Whoever they were, they beat me about the head and left me for dead in the closet. They took my pistol and my papers—though the documents can't have been of much benefit to them, for the more important part of my mission I had committed to memory only."

Fuentes raised his eyebrows. "They were. . . ?"

"The Italian military said it hadn't been their work, and I believed them. Were the gang the Marshal's partisans? Probably. I did not raise that tender subject with the venerable President last week, and it's unlikely that he knows himself, for I was of no great consequence at the time, and he has slain his myriads. I babbled much during my stay in the hospital, out of my head, but the Italians concluded that though perhaps something of a spy, I was more of a harmless lunatic; so they were content to expel me from Spalato."

"But what about the rooms behind the door in the closet?" Didi was flushed and wonder-struck. "Didn't you ever find out?"

"Not until this morning, my dear. I was transferred from hospital to ship, on being deported, without stay or ceremony, and I hadn't set foot again in Spalato until this week. Must you have the epilogue? What a little glutton for punishment you are! Very well: if you and Arthur don't object to a stroll after this prolonged dinner of ours, I'll lead you up through Veli Varos, which is more or less on the way to your hotel: an eighteenth-century suburb of peasants, labyrinthine as the Grad, on slopes. On the way you shall have my sequel."

They all left the restaurant, the woman cook locking the door behind them. They said little to each other for some minutes, marvelling or embarrassed. Arcane spoke a few words to the security-man, who took the lead as they walked uphill. "I recall vaguely a spot where my mother and I sat once, looking down at the Grad, somewhere high in Veli Varos, and that chap thinks he can take us there," Arcane told Didi. He fell silent again.

Arthur—who, as Didi knew too well, grew uncomfortable when other people narrated their dreams—was walking ahead, beside the

security chief; she guessed that he was asking him about crime and punishment in Yugoslavia. Flanked by Manfred and Fuentes, Didi made her way upward through the dreamy night, picturesque stone cottages on either side of their tortuous route. Their retinue of grim men loitered in the rear.

"Manfred," she ventured with hesitation, "you've done everything, and you've been everywhere, even out of the world. Why have you bothered with us? Arthur is so dull, and I'm so silly!"

There came a low laugh. "How you undervalue yourself, young woman! Yet I confess that I chose you two for reasons. For one, you are *substantial*, both of you. I don't mean plump—perish the thought! Arthur is a fine figure of a man, and you are a finer figure of a young woman, Didi Ross. I mean, rather, that indubitably you two are flesh and blood, healthily normal, not given to illusions, not in love with shadows, not phantoms yourselves: sound sensible folk."

Privately, Didi was not quite sure she relished the latter part of that description. Sensible? What about feeling?

"Now my duties, African and European, bring me into the company of human grotesques—people warped, bent, eccentric. You and the Judge are centric: what a relief! My usual companions—I exempt stout Fuentes—are afflicted by Augustine's three lusts: by cupidity, passion for possessions; by the lust for power, usurping the throne of God; by the lust for women's bodies—or men's. Such folk cannot be trusted with confidences, candid memoirs, and I love to be frank. You can be trusted; and besides, being out of my world, there's no one to whom you could betray me. How strange and pleasant to talk with the innocent! Centricity, all hail!"

She didn't know that she relished this praise, either. Could she win a personality contest as Mrs. Centricity of 1978? Arcane held her arm tightly, lest she stumble on the cobbles; he was strong still.

"More than that, Didi, the experiences of yesterday that I have promised to describe to you, and my boring reminiscences of this evening, have cast my consciousness into the realm of phantoms. In Hamnegri, the vulgar call me 'the Father of Shadows'—signifying that I have slain many in war, and that my ways are crepuscular. You

and the Judge, so substantial, fetch me back from the antagonist world of madness and despair to the ordered world — or what remains of it — that is supported by custom and convention: the sort of world that Diocletian vainly fought to shore up. Have I answered your question, Fair One?"

This man, with his playfulness, also was the man who dared to sleep again, night after night, in the Hungry Room where the violence and horror had come upon him. She'd never have poked her nose within that chamber door — unless Manfred Arcane was with her. Brave as Diocletian! Had Diocletian flirted? Probably not. There was a Latin word, she thought, for what Diocletian had possessed and what Manfred didn't: *gravitas*, that was it. Arthur had considerable *gravitas*. She hadn't reflected on that when she had accepted his ring.

Manfred glanced at her slyly. "And besides, you are so very pretty! I possess a collection of grotesques, and another collection of pretty things — among the latter, my antique medallions and coins, my Italian primitive paintings, my ivories — some kept in Spain, some in Hamnegri. Would that I were a Moslem! Then I might keep a harem in the old slavers' lair of Haggat, and carry you off, a Sabine prize, from the good Judge. But, Papist that I am and pillar of righteousness that in recent years I have tried to become, all I may do is to present a pretty thing to a pretty creature."

He took from his pocket the coin with which he had been playing in the restaurant, and pressed it into Didi's surprised palm. "There! When I am lapped in lead, which should occur not many years from now, take this from your jewel-case now and again, and recollect me — and the Emperor, too."

It was a Roman medallion of gold, in splendid condition, almost as if it had been minted yesterday. On the face was Diocletian in clear profile, wearing a solar crown — a massive head, beautifully delineated, the Emperor's eyes weary, his expression composed and confident. On the obverse was a superb Jupiter, with thunderbolt and scepter, his foot upon a barbarian; winged Victory was offering him a globe.

They had paused under a streetlamp, Fuentes having walked on ahead, to examine the little treasure. "For me!" Didi exclaimed. "But this ought to be in a museum!"

"Clap it in your boudoir-museum, young madam."

"Wherever did you get this, Manfred?" A wild surmise rose in Didi's mind; her lips parted in wonder.

"Would you believe me, Didi Ross, if I told you that Diocletian thrust it into my palm, as just now I pressed it into your little hand?"

"Really? I'd believe almost anything you might tell me."

"Would you? Then you *would* be rather silly. I'm crammed with guile: thus I survive in Africa. But I shan't deceive you tonight. No, there's a great gulf fixed between the realm of matter and the realm of spirit, and such light trinkets as this can't be tossed across that gulf. The Emperor gave me no aureate mementoes—only an apologue of sorts.

"This medallion I happened upon day before yesterday, in a curiosity-shop of the Grad. The proprietor fetched it out from under the counter, surreptitiously, and would not say where he'd acquired it. I suspect it may have been found by some light-fingered laborer in the cellars of the Palace, under the imperial apartments, where the excavations still are going on. This fine thing lay buried in dung, century upon century.

"If I didn't like you heartily, Didi, I should have played upon your ingenuousness and have told you that the Emperor defied nature to endow me with this souvenir. Yet isn't it nearly as marvellous that I contrived to pick up such a rarity just when I was about to make my romantic attempt upon that clay-sealed bronze door, once penetrated in vision? Now look at the obverse again. The figure of Jupiter on this medallion is identical with the statue of Jupiter I saw in the Emperor's halls, that night I was knocked on the head."

"Oh, Manfred! How . . ."

From a little higher up the lane, the security-man called something discreetly. "He's found the bench!" Arcane rejoiced.

There was a small open space by a great old fig-tree, and in it was

a marble seat, chipped and worn. "Do rest here, and I'll conclude my True Narration," Arcane told them. "I'll be Ancient Pistol for you."

The seat had room for four, but Arcane stood before them, his ebony stick held like a sword, self-mockingly playing Bobadill. Cleon and Brasidas squatted on the ground, their liquid round eyes fixed upon their foster-father. The security-men leaned against a garden wall, pretending to hear nothing. Below them, to the east, were the lights of the Grad. They could make out the dim bulk of the Palace, and the medieval campanile was illuminated.

"I told you, Judge," Arcane began, "that my misadventure of 1943 — the strangest part of it — was no dream, but an *experience*. I must have been very near to physical extinction, lying beaten about the head in that closet. But the soul — *animula*, the Romans would have said, that which animates the carcass — somehow flitted. My *animula* burst from time into timelessness. Remember another great emperor's lines — '*Animula vagula, blandula . . .*' You don't? Let me do it into English:

*'Little, gentle, wandering soul,
Guest and comrade of the body,
Who departest into space,
Naked, stiff, and colorless,
All thy wonted jests are done.'*

So the magnificent Hadrian, dying."

"You really did find the Emperor there, then?" Didi bent forward toward Arcane in her intensity. "You *went* there, without a body?"

"I *know* it, Judge's wife. But what proof might I offer scoffing Diogenes — or your Judge here? Yet what is our word 'there,' and what our word 'then'? He and I were in space of a sort — reconstituted or restored space, if you will, but seemingly tangible space. Energy cannot be created, nor can it be destroyed: it merely alters its forms and expressions. The thunderbolt, the fireball, are energy pure and chaotic, agglomerations of atoms which assume patterns more infinitely varied than the patterns of a child's kaleidoscope. And why

should we disbelieve that some inscrutable Will may shape again, for some moments, a pattern discarded long ago?

"As for 'then'—why, according to the greatest of your American poets, time present and time past are both perhaps contained in time future, and time future contained in time past. In some fashion, this nocturnal happy moment in Veli Varos which we share, just 'now,' is a timeless moment. Beyond the frontiers of time, we may live it afresh."

"I believe that," said Didi, and little tears ran down her cheeks.

"I don't," said Arthur. "I won't buy that."

"I'm not offering it at auction, Judge Ross. 'At the Devil's booth all things are sold. . . .' No one can traffick in love and eternity. Am I turning sententious?" Arcane abruptly flung his ebony stick with the elephant's head high into the air, caught it like a juggler, brandished it as if it were a baton. "I'm no doctor of the schools, but a clown. Had I stayed longer, I would have essayed to make the Emperor himself laugh. One may as well laugh as cry."

Could this agile man, with his skipping energy, really have been born before the crash of empires, as he declared? Didi was dabbing at her cheeks with her handkerchief; Arthur looked vexed at that.

"So what did you find in that hotel of yours last night and this morning, Mr. Arcane?" Arthur sounded like Doubting Thomas.

Arcane put his stick behind his back and leaned upon it, like a Victorian dandy. "On the first two nights, this week, I was restless and disquieted, nothing more: I suppose that is what most hotel-guests experience in that particular room. Last night, however—my anniversary night, so to speak—I woke suddenly at three, and the frightful hunger came upon me. It was not quite so intense, I think, as on the first and second occasions, but it was trying enough.

"I looked into that closet. The ancient door was unaltered, and those bolts had not stirred from their sockets: I could not pretend even to myself that I had succeeded in forcing them in 1943—not physically. But the *animula* drew them that year, I assure you. That was all which happened last night, and I didn't go so far in my

enthusiasm for mysteries as to hire thugs to bash in my head for me all over again. My dread last night was less, because I *knew*. The truly horrid terrors are the unknown terrors."

"But the door!" Didi entreated. "Are those rooms actually behind that door?"

Arcane came over and sat beside her on the bench. "I had decided not to tamper with the door in the recess until I had made my scouting-expedition of last night. It might not have done to alter the physical conditions; we don't know what laws govern such phenomena. Incidentally, almost nothing seems to have changed in that room since 1943, except that the walls are painted pink now. But I arranged, yesterday afternoon, for two curators from the Municipal Museum in the Papalić palace to visit me in my room this morning; also two joiners.

"The curators were surprised and delighted to find the battered stone doorway—of a limestone that blackens with age, a stone used elsewhere in portions of the Palace—back of the recess. They'd had no notion it was there. How many other curiosities lie undiscovered in the Grad, even though archeologists and architects and artists had been poking about energetically ever since Adam—since Robert Adam, that is? The curators pronounced that doorway very late third-century work, probably part of Diocletian's original construction.

"Yet there could be nothing behind the old door, they declared. 'Let me see, then,' I told them. You will understand that I hadn't informed them about what had happened to me in this room during the War; I didn't wish them to think me madder than I am. This was unseemly haste for members of the museum-bureaucracy, but I had in my pocket a formal letter of commendation from the President-Marshal, so they could not well say me nay. I set the joiners to work.

"They could not budge the rusted bolts without damaging the door, so they labored upon the hinges, and after three-quarters of an hour took off the door intact. Behind it was a short flight of brick steps, leading upward, as in my Experience. What say you to that,

Judge? Yet there was no great bronze door at the top of the stair: instead, an old timber ceiling closed the way."

"And you broke through?" Arthur asked, obviously stirred despite himself.

Arcane shook his head. "The hotel manager, who had come up to watch our vandalism, humbly implored me not to take the roof off his establishment if that possibly could be averted. And the curators—who were slightly miffed at there being *something*, the brick steps, behind the door, after all—assured me that they knew the roof which lay beyond. It was on their charts and plans, which they displayed to me.

"‘Show me, learned colleagues,’ I told them—and bestowed gratuities, under the guise of adding to the funds of the Municipal Museum. So they took me outside, and upstairs in an adjoining house—not older than the seventeenth century, I judged, if that—and then out a window to a low-sloping tiled roof. It became clear even to me that we three were standing just above the head of the brick steps, and that whatever once had extended beyond that vanished bronze door must have gone to wrack and ruin long ago."

"*Nada?*" Fuentes asked.

"Nothing but a few little fragments are left today of the Emperor's private apartments—a doorway of the library and lesser scraps. Beyond the Vestibule that fronts on the Peristyle, all the upper level of that quarter of the Palace, which contained the imperial suite, was pulled down for building-material sometime in the Dark Ages by the citizenry of Spalato. Gone, all gone—throne room, reception hall, dining hall, bedrooms, library, everything. Nobody, two curators included, has any clear idea even of the plan of Diocletian's private apartments—though they hope they may learn a good deal more from excavation of the cellars immediately below.

"Without confessing my Experience to those pedantic curators, I suggested to them that I had conceived a notion of what the rooms may have looked like. Then I described, under a slight veil, what I had seen in my brief Experience—my vision, if you will, Judge Ross.

The first hall through which I passed, I take to have been the reception-salon; the second, the room with the statues, I fancy to have been the dining hall. *Vision* at least, mark you, Judge: definitely not *dream*. It was through the gates of horn that I passed, not through the gates of ivory. Well, the curators were astounded: my 'suggestions' very nearly coincided with their own speculations, arrived at after decades of prying into the remains of the Palace. They were overly eager to learn where I had picked up my theory that great statues of Jupiter and Mithra had stood in one hall; Mithra especially. I smiled mysteriously. I'm certain that they now fancy me to be some famous archeologist, a rival in their trade, disguised as a statist. When I would tell them no more, they must have yearned to expel me as the Venetian masters of Spalato had expelled innocent Robert Adam."

In the shadows under the fig-tree, Didi put her hand on Arcane's hand, as if to make sure that he was quick, not dead. "Then you truly did see . . ."

"What no man may have seen for a thousand years or more—yes. And why was I given that uncanny glimpse? Why should the Emperor speak to me? Only God knows. Perhaps it all was a caution to me that I should never dismount the African tiger that I ride—and have ridden as long as Diocletian rode his Roman tiger. Perhaps because he and I, in some respects, are sib in mind and character—he in his great way, I in my small one. Soldiers and statistes, struggling to hold the state together when Dinos is lord of creation, having overthrown Zeus—men of good intentions and some talents, compelled by necessity to be harsh in a bent time, to govern more than one heart of darkness—why, such was his lot, such mine. He had a great civilization to uphold, I a barbarous principality. Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

"Then, too, I had thought about him since I was a small child; and when my consciousness passed through that door, I was almost as nigh unto death as he. Deep may have cried unto deep."

"*Excellentissimo*, was the Emperor in Hell?"

"That's better discussed, Don Pelayo, in Spanish, when our friends have gone to bed. Spanish is the language of faith, Didi. In Hell? In Purgatory? Our theological formulas cannot suffice us when we encounter such glimpses as mine, because we created beings are time-bound, here below. Lactantius and Eusebius and the whole crew of Constantinian ecclesiastic writers were eager to chuck Diocletian into the fire eternal, for he had authorized the last Roman persecution of Christians. But it is not the Constantines of this world, nor even the learned clerics, who sit upon the bench at the Last Judgment."

"They taught us in Sunday school," Didi volunteered, "that you can't be saved unless you've taken Christ for your saviour, and Diocletian didn't do that."

"Ah, you delightful dogmatist! Is Licinius in glory because he tolerated Christians? I recall an American lyric that I used to play on the gramophone—something like 'ever'body talks about Hebben ain't gwine dere.' Does Constantine sit on the left hand of God because of that alleged deathbed baptism? Is that kindly beauty Valeria tormented hereafter, as here, because she did not see the Light before they took off her head? And is Diocletian, a man just and pious according to his ancient lights, damned because he did not understand the New Dispensation? What would you make of a human Supreme Justice, Judge Ross, who handed down such verdicts? God knows what we cannot—the heart. By that knowledge He judges.

"The meaning of my Experience I do not comprehend. Some tinge or echo of an ancient agony broods over the Palace of Diocletian, detected on rare occasions by such a one as I. For a very few minutes—if one may speak of 'minutes' beyond Time—I, like an intruding ghost, shared the Emperor's despair. I entered with my wandering consciousness into the past. It was a fragment of Diocletian's experience, and a fragment of my experience, coinciding. But as for the eternal state of Diocletian, *dominus et deus*, the last man of the classical age to be declared a god—why, ask the angels.

"I know only that he died with the high old Roman virtue, as became a great emperor. He would not beg for mercy from his own creatures, men merciless. He would not do violence upon his own body, because Jove's divine spark inhabited it. Thus, with every luxury about him, he accepted no food, letting Nature reclaim his atoms. So resolute a man may be forgiven much, on high."

"But the Red King's dream, Manfred—where does that come in?" Didi hadn't forgotten one sentence that this charismatic man had spoken.

"Aye, there's the rub, young sibyl of Ohio. Suppose that my imperial host—to him I must have been a spectral guest—was sound in his dying intuitions, and that your servant is nothing more than a phantom character in the Emperor's dream. Then am I here with you at all? If Diocletian ceases to dream in his palace beyond Time, will I cease to be—as *corpus*, as *animula*? I do wish he'd not suggested that: the fancy haunts me. Yet only in the last delirium might he have spoken so. I'd almost assent to my own annihilation, would that redeem the Emperor from the utter desolation of his dream. Yet let us suppose the contrary: that he was mistaken, and his dream is ended already, and Diocletian freed of agony. That Jovian thunderbolt in his chamber—why, I think of Eliot's lines:

*'The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.'*

Diocletian appealed to the God of All, asking for a sign, and a sign was given. After all, may he not have been a dying god, as the old Romans understood godhood? His talents were more than human, and his energies. What modern man could rule all the lands he ruled, with such instruments as he possessed then, and bring to them justice and peace? Wasn't he driven down to dusty death, like wife and daughter before him, because he was righteous in a criminal age? And wasn't he crucified, so to speak: that long agony of starvation, with no sop of vinegar carried to him? No, I'll not believe, my

friends, that Diocletian's dream — 'why has thou forsaken me?' — will have been inflicted upon Diocletian forever."

Meekly for so hard-faced a man, the principal security agent came up behind Arcane and whispered something in his ear. The Minister without Portfolio drew from his waistcoat a handsome gold watch. "My father's," he confided to Didi, flourishing the watch. "What is this Time it ticks away?"

He turned toward Fuentes. "Midnight, Don Pelayo! These bold devotees of Holy Marx, Lenin, and Tito work in shifts as if they were wage-slaves of decadent capitalism. We must let them go. And poor Judge Ross, too, entombed in my foolish mausoleum of talk! Come, it's but a little way to the hotel: we'll walk you there, and then take cabs back into the Grad."

He extended his hand and raised Didi from the stone seat. "It's a clear night, Pride of Ohio: look at the sea. Do you think this Dalmatian shore the loveliest coast in the world? I do. Yet its people are sour, and its history bloody. There's a puzzle for us. Now look over there, by the campanile — we can see the roof of the Mausoleum. He built for the ages, and that must count for something in the Book of Judgment."

"I don't know how to thank . . ." Didi began. "Oh, I'm saying shallow things again! I mean, I never knew anybody like you. Oh, dear, that's equally silly, isn't it — because there isn't anybody like you to know." She noticed without sorrow that Arthur had rejoined the security-man, doubtless hoping to obtain more solid information, and so was proceeding already up the lane to the Marjan.

"It might be a wilder world if there were many like me," Arcane answered. "Smile, Proud Beauty! Do remain centric, Didi Ross, I beg of you. Centricity, lovely centricity! Diocletian had that, and so kept the peace for twenty years. One lapse into eccentricity, the Persecution, undid everything. Had I been centric, I might — but then, grown centric, I suppose I'd not divert you."

Taking her right hand, he raised it to his lips and imprinted upon

it several small Viennese kisses, up to the wrist. She didn't know what to say. Was she supposed to extend the left hand for similar treatment? She wouldn't have minded.

"Say good night to Diocles, my dear, wherever he may be." His hand on her elbow, he faced Didi toward the Grad, the Palace, the Mausoleum. She saw that his face had grown solemn, its blandness cast aside as if it had been a mask. He moved his arm as if to salute; then changed his mind, it seemed, and instead crossed himself.

"Good night, Diocletian, Imperator, wherever you may be," she breathed obediently, and without mockery.

"May I die so well as you did, Dominus," Arcane murmured. "And not, I hope, chopped up by pangas on some tour of inspection in the south." Leading Didi in the direction of the big hotel, "Remember me in your orisons, child."

"And in my dreams?" Oh, she shouldn't have said that.

"What an honor to be one of your figments, dear Didi Ross—well worth annihilation at your waking! Alas, now here we are, approaching your monstrous inn: what a ghastly flood of electric light from the place! Half the guests come from Eastern Europe, I suppose, where they strain their eyes beneath fifteen-watt bulbs, despite Lenin's aphorism that communism is socialism plus electricity. So this garishness is paradisiacal for them, poor things. When they depart from here—why, 'Dark, dark, dark; they all go into the dark.'"

She was holding in her hand the medallion of Diocletian. "Don't throw away that imperial trinket, Didi," he told her. "Give it to your daughter, when you bear one, and call her Valeria."

"But if it's a boy baby?"

"In Ohio, if you christen him Manfred, he'll be turned democratically into plain Freddie."

Blushing, she had not hit upon a witty retort when Arthur came down the steps to collect her. "No ghosts here, Mr. Arcane," Arthur said, indicating the brilliant hotel, still noisy at this hour.

"There will be, Judge Ross. Every age leaves its specters to posterity. Doubtless those from our era will be mean enough, thin

wailing ghosts like the Greeks' *κῆρες*, impotent in death as in life. This hotel will be pulled down, or blown up, centuries before Diocletian's Mausoleum finally crumbles. No gods or demigods of our century will defy Cronos. Still, some puny specters from the Age of Anxiety will walk the night even in the ruins of this hotel, in the next Dark Age." He shook Arthur's hand.

"That was a good dinner and a good yarn, Mr. Arcane. Maybe we'll get together again sometime." Arthur did not sound wholly sincere. One of the security-men was holding open the door of a cab for the Minister without Portfolio; Fuentes already was inside it.

"Oh, Manfred! Wait, wait!" Didi cried, ignoring Arthur's frown. Then she didn't know what to say. "I mean—you're vanishing as if you really were something in somebody's dream. It isn't right!"

"You're not dreaming, Didi Ross," Manfred said to her, with a parting smile that would haunt her like a strong ghost of ancient times. "Nor will we lose each other, child. Dreams? It's death that is the insubstantial dream. You're glowing with life; and it's people who never knew vitality that are extinguished like spent candles. Diocletian starved to a skeleton was more alive than most human creatures ever are. Be a goddess, Didi, meant for immortality!"

He touched her hand a last time, with fingertips only. "There! I endow you with eternal awareness! We're wrapped in mysteries always; if that weren't so, it would be better not to be born. And the grandest mystery is this: that certain moments of temporal experience defy the tooth of time—not moments of dream, but moments of truth. Such moments of agony occur, and such moments of love: agony greater than flesh could bear, love more intense than flesh could express."

Didi was clinging to the window-frame of the taxi; Arthur was shaking hands with the chief security-man, who was about to enter the second taxi.

"Did there come upon you tonight, Didi Ross, such moments?" Manfred Arcane asked her, his eyes luminous, not twinkling. "I see the look upon your face. Those moments, mark me, will be re-experienced in their fullness, perhaps countless times, beyond the

limits of this sensual decaying world of ours. Do you follow me, my Didi? Why, if not now, later you will. Throughout eternity, you and I will meet by the Mausoleum, laughing together."

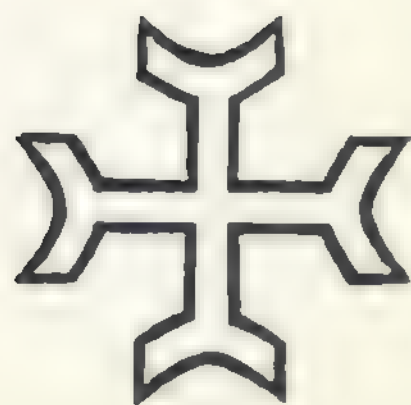
He slid into the cab, his eyes still fixed upon hers; waved, and was gone—gone back to the Hungry Room within the Palace, gone perhaps to jest with shadows as he jested with the living.

"Like an emperor himself," Didi murmured, her eyes wet. "Good night, Emperor! Almost like a god himself."

Arthur yawned. "What did you say? Do you think that man has all his marbles?" Arthur asked. Arthur's slang always was redolent of yesteryear.

"From Roman quarries," said Didi.

THE CELLAR OF LITTLE EGYPT



*Where will we all be a hundred years from now?
Where will we all be a hundred years from now?
Pushing up the daisies, pushing up the daisies:
That's where we'll all be a hundred years from now.*

THE OTHER MORNING I heard the little scamps across the street singing this, and it set me to thinking of Uncle Jake and Amos Trimble. You don't believe there's anything in a town like New Devon but asphalt pavements and supermarkets. Well, grow to be an old codger here, the way I have, and you'll come to know that life's as much a puzzle in New Devon as it is anywhere. And folks remember things they don't tell children. . . . But I'll tell you about Amos Trimble, as my Uncle Jake told me. That'll do for a sample.

When I was little we had eight shoemakers in town. Fifty years gone; but it could be a thousand, for the difference in New Devon. Eight shoemakers in town then, and nowadays never a one left. That old way of living was strangled by the factories and the cars. North along the river road, beginning where the town dump is now and stretching on for miles, were good farms — farms of the kind you can't find in the whole county these days. Look at the Millard place, what's left of it, and you'll have a notion. Most of the others are gone, every scrap of them, the square brick houses with cupolas, and carriage barns behind them, and scale houses. Next to the dump, you can see

the foundation of one of the biggest: the house where Amos Trimble lived, and afterward—but that's another matter.

It's hard to think of New Devon without mills. On the south side you see as many smokestacks as I saw barns on the river road, when I used to steal my Uncle Jake's plug tobacco. Where the tube mill stands, Amos Trimble used to drive that surrey of his through the shortcut to Little Egypt. A little red scar was over Mr. Trimble's right eye, that touched his eyelid and wrinkled if he looked sidewise at you; but he didn't often look at me—he wasn't the sort that boys ask pennies from.

Eight shoemakers, then; and Uncle Jake was one. The three of us, his nephews, used to sit in his shop, watching him nailing down soles. He'd put a nail where he wanted it, and raise the hammer, and pound three times. "Hum, hum, hum!" he'd say; and when it went home, "Hum, b'God!" When he wasn't looking, we'd stick his tobacco in our pockets. Jake was in his thirties, but he seemed like an old man to us; and he was old, too. Turning away from the liquor made a change in him, and keeping off the bottle took nerve for a man who belonged to my family. But from the day Dan Slattery died downstairs in Little Egypt, Jake wouldn't look at booze.

We had a different kind of men in New Devon those days. Could they work! But, then, that's all there was for them—work, or else drink. Never a day without a real fight—half of them at Little Egypt. No movies, no lodges, no women in barrooms—nothing but work and whiskey. The men were devils for both. After he had to leave the liquor, Uncle Jake could only work. You never see a man, these days, drive himself the way Jake did. He didn't leave himself time to think. There'd been a day when people called him a great reader—before he got in with the boys at Little Egypt. I suppose he'd have been happier if he had been a fool. Maybe that was why he loved the whiskey; it made a fool of him. When he was sober he thought of what he'd like to be and never could—too slow for the turf, too light for the plow. And so he was drunk all his life, first on rot-gut, then on work.

You and I have got our feet on the ground. Sometimes that's an advantage; sometimes not. There are things we miss. A dog hears sounds a man can't; a fellow like Jake who hasn't got his feet on the ground, who's drunk and weak and maybe a little off—why, how can you or I judge what they see or feel, these fellows, or how much truth they make out through a whiskey-fog? I don't know. Jake was no fool, and I think he never lied. He was drunk on the day Slattery died, and he wasn't afraid, much; but as he thought about it afterward, he froze. Nobody could get him to touch a bottle, after that time in the cellar of Little Egypt.

Most of what I know about this I learned from Jake one afternoon in his shop—Jake sitting cross-legged on the bench, a shoe half-finished in his lap, his little blue eyes (hard as marbles) looking past me toward the window, as if he wanted to see who might peer in. Jake was cold sober when he told me, and had been that way for years.

My Uncle Jake was the first man in New Devon to see Amos Trimble. I think he was the last to see him, too. On a fall morning, Jake said, a square-built bearded man who might have been almost forty or might have been younger, came off the train from Detroit and put his bag on the cinders beside the depot. Along the railway siding New Devon was no beauty spot, even then; and I don't suppose Jake made it prettier—leaning against the depot, rough looking as they come, and needing a shave, as always. The man from off the train looked round as if he were saying, "I'd straighten this up, fast," and then eyed Jake. Jake wasn't the kind to kowtow to God Almighty, so he kept on leaning; but he said to me, there in the shop, "Roy, that fellow made me squirm. He had green eyes that looked right into your damned rotten heart."

"Well, sir," said the stranger to Jake, "I'm Amos Trimble, and I'm looking for the Devon House." Jake stood up, though he wasn't naturally obliging, and nodded:

"All right, Mr. Trimble; I can take a walk that way." When they got to the Devon House, Trimble stood Jake a drink. Amos Trimble was a drinking man, Jake said; but he was stone sober, all the same,

day or night. "Frightening collected, all the time," were the words Jake used, "except when he wanted to make you laugh. He could split your sides if he had a mind to. Fact is, he could make anybody do anything." Jake took to him, right away, though Jake didn't care for many people.

Trimble came to New Devon from the West. Whether he had been born out there, he didn't say; and nobody asked Amos Trimble questions like that. I don't mean that Trimble had a Past, in the usual way of speaking. He lived his own life, that was all, and it may not have been happy. He could tell you stories for hours, but they weren't stories about himself. He was honest straight through, and when he told you to lick dirt, you licked. It leaked out that he had been a lumberman and a land speculator and a judge of probate; and now he was going to stay in New Devon, where he had bought a farm for himself and was going to buy and sell the farms of other people. He had some money and was likely to have more. Only the cellar hole is there by the dump, now, but what was the Adams place—the oldest big house in the township—was grand when Trimble came to New Devon, and he bought it. He made it his house right away, and it stayed Amos Trimble's house, even after he was gone, until it burned. Trimble cut his mark deep on everything. He lived alone; his tenants across the road took care of the farm. That house came to look like Trimble, square and shaggy and proud.

At Little Egypt, the boys didn't know what to make of Mr. Trimble—Dan Slattery and Jack Cane and Red Fellows and the rest. Cane thought he was a man to steer clear of; Fellows said Cane was yellow; and the two of them tangled about it one afternoon till Mrs. Johnston, who owned Little Egypt, had to come downstairs with a broom and get them both outside, her black wig falling off as she shoved them through the doorway, showing her old bald head to everybody at the depot. Where the Hotel Puritan is today, that's where Little Egypt stood. Sixty years before, it had been a first-rate tavern, one of the prettiest in the state; I've got a snapshot of it, taken the year they tore it down. Downstairs was a good solid tap-room, and above that six or seven sleeping rooms; it had columns

along the second story, facing the street, like the Millard place. But when Mrs. Johnston, old Baldy Johnston, ran it, it was a filthy hole. It had been named the Madison, but after some of the boys went to the Exposition at Chicago, they called the saloon Little Egypt, because it was as free as that dancing girl in '92. In Baldy Johnston's time there was still a long oak bar, and Slattery was behind it.

Bloody Dan, my brothers and I used to call him after looking round to make sure he wasn't down the alley. Six feet four, almost, and built for it. He'd been a butcher, and liked the work, but he got free drinks behind the bar at Little Egypt. It was something curious to watch him knock a cow between the eyes or slit a pig's throat—one knock, one slice, and all over. Blood was slopped on him most days, since he butchered for Smith now and then even after he was hired by Baldy Johnston. At Little Egypt nobody minded a barkeeper with a little blood on him. It wasn't safe to mind Dan, anyway. He had more cunning in him than you'd think, to look at his big empty face with all the front teeth missing. Dan was an animal, with a beast's quickness and a beast's suspicions.

As for Red Fellows, he was a rough customer who'd crippled his mother with a couple of kicks one night after he lost his shirt at poker. Jack Cane, who stuck with them, had served time for stealing; he was mostly muscle. Jake used to play cards with them a good deal—he was one man that dared to.

And Amos Trimble—it's odd enough—was in and out of Little Egypt some days. He seemed to have a liking for a bit of rough company. Good at poker, Trimble, as at everything; and even Bloody Dan forked over when he lost to him. I don't suppose Dan loved him, though.

But it was only some evenings that you could find Mr. Trimble at Little Egypt. Other times, he'd stick among the books at his old square house, his kerosene lamp burning all night. He read a lot, that was clear; but other nights, Jake thought, Trimble must have sat from sundown to sunup in his high leather chair, not moving, not reading, staring into some corner. He wasn't a man you could kid. Brice, the undertaker, came on business one evening, and found

Trimble that way, sitting straight and solemn, his eyes open but not blinking. Brice had to shake Mr. Trimble two or three times before he stirred; and when he did wake, or speak, the whites of his eyes showed with anger, though he was polite enough, and Brice wished he never had touched him. A queer duck, in a fine house; but the house was dark and musty with only Trimble there. Jake said it would have given him the creeps to live in it alone; he got a look at the place the day he went with Brice and George Russell (who was deputy sheriff) to tell Amos Trimble what had happened to Jingo Criminy. When you needed any sort of help, Trimble was the man to look to. Russell needed it, and he remembered that Trimble had been a judge. They came up through the deep snow that covered the steps, that January, and Trimble led them to the upstairs parlor, and they told him about Jingo Criminy. It had been a dull winter in New Devon, until then.

What Jingo Criminy's real name was doesn't matter. "Well, by Jingo Criminy!" the dirty old man would say, whether he'd taken in another dollar or dropped his glass eye. Jingo had lived alone in his cabin across the river for twenty years and more, and he didn't spend much on himself. The dollars came in, slowly, and Jingo Criminy hid them away. In twenty years, a heap of silver dollars can go into a box. There must have been a good many men in New Devon who thought about those dollars, because it was three miles from Jingo's cabin to town. Three men thought too long.

How did Jake know there were three? No, he wasn't one, for Jake had a heart; but talk comes out. There were three of them, and they took a cutter: three big men, faces hard as the ice on the road, and it was cold — too cold for anybody else to be out that evening. The snow crunched under the runners, and they came to Jingo's cabin, and they broke down the door. Crazy old coots like Jingo don't talk, even with matches at their feet, but sometimes they talk when they're strapped to the stove. Maybe Jingo Criminy talked, and maybe they found the hole in the floor without his help. They tore up the boards and emptied the box and went away in the cutter; but when they

went, they left Jingo Criminy still strapped to the stove. A couple of days later, someone noticed the cabin door open, and looked in.

That meant a job for Uncle Jake. Brice was a good undertaker, but there were times when he needed help, and Jake was his man. Nothing turned Jake's stomach, which was cast iron. He and Brice took old Jingo off the stove, while Russell stood by; and as soon as they could, they went to Trimble's. Nothing was known, then, about the cutter and the three men, you understand: the snow had melted partway down, so there were no tracks.

If anybody knew men, Trimble did. Deputy Russell came to him for that and for something more. You could see that Trimble had power; some people said that he had powers. Russell believed in powers. Those were the big years for the spiritualists. Russell believed in the whole kit and kaboodle, and nobody thought he was queer. Trimble didn't take too much stock in it, Jake said. Could he see things, though—things afar off, or done in the past? Yes, sometimes, Trimble told them. He would try. They sat in the dark of the upstairs parlor with their fingers pressed hard on the tabletop. Jake was across from Trimble. The sight of Jingo hadn't turned a hair of Jake's head, but Trimble's green eyes two feet away behind the candle flame was a sight he didn't like. For five minutes they sat, till Trimble's voice said, "They tied him with his face to the stove."

"That's true, Mr. Trimble," Russell whispered. "What about *their* faces?"

Amos Trimble stood up and lit the gas; Jake saw sweat running down his forehead. "That's no evidence for you—not yet," Trimble said. "I'll see what I can find. I'm going to Little Egypt, once I write this note." He scribbled something while Jake and the rest were getting on their coats, and tucked it away. "I'll see you tonight, Mr. Russell," he said. But he didn't.

Trimble had faith in himself, as he had a right to. Something slipped that evening—Jake never knew what; but for once, Trimble failed himself. He didn't make the mistake twice.

Down to Little Egypt Trimble went; and Jake, being thirsty and

curious, went with him. Fellows and Cane and a couple of boomer switchmen were near the bar, Slattery and a helper behind it. Baldy Johnston was sick abed upstairs that day. One of the switchmen called Jake over for a drink, while Trimble walked halfway round the bar and looked at Slattery. There wasn't the man who could help being stared down by Amos Trimble.

"Well?" asked Dan. Nothing happened. "Well, Mr. Trimble?" For him, Trimble was the only Mister in town, and he must have hated Trimble for it.

"What's roasting today, Slattery?" Trimble said. A vein swelled across Dan's forehead; he opened his mouth wide, but no words came.

Red Fellows, for once, thought faster than Dan. "What you say to a game, Mr. Trimble?" Fellows edged closer, till Trimble looked sidewise at him, the little scar on his eyelid puckering; then Fellows shifted back.

"I'll play your game," said Amos Trimble.

"Let's go in the back room, then," growled Dan, who hadn't quite got his breath back. Trimble nodded and motioned to the three to go in ahead of him; he shook his head at Jake, who had started to rise; and then Trimble closed the door behind himself. Jake heard chairs scraping up to the table and made out Dan's voice every few minutes—whining first, then hoarse. But Jake had other fish to fry, because one boomer switchman was in the cash and the drinks were on him. Even Jake had his limit for whiskey, and he went past it.

Something roused Jake of a sudden. How long had he been lying with his head on the table, alone? He didn't know. It was a breaking noise that woke him, he thought, and he shook his head. The boomer switchmen were gone; there was no light in the taproom. He could see light coming from under the door of the back room, though. He headed for it and turned the knob, but the door was bolted. Jake gave it a kick. Nobody spoke. "Come on!" said Jake, and nearly knocked a panel out. The door opened a crack, Dan showing his ugly face behind it. Jake gave him a shove and stepped in, nearly falling flat over the trapdoor to the cellar, which had been thrown open in

the middle of the kitchen floor. Dan swore, and steadied Jake, who was blinking in the light. The room was empty except for Dan, who must have been washing, because water and suds were slopped over him. That surprised Jake a bit, soap not being in Dan's line.

"Where's Mr. Trimble and the rest?" Jake asked him.

"Gone home, long ago," was all Dan said, slamming down the cellar trap and standing upon it.

Jake still didn't know what had waked him, but he was willing to forget. He told Dan to give him another bottle. "Serve yourself," said Dan, pushing him out into the bar. Jake obliged, and finally put his head down on the table for a minute.

Jake woke again, and found he was lying on the porch of Little Egypt in the snow—nothing for Jake—and it was sometime in the early morning, and not a star out. Jake could walk, but he didn't feel like it. If Slattery had put him out, he'd try his luck with Slattery tomorrow. His bed was half a mile away. Just then, though, he heard a buggy coming out of the stable behind Little Egypt: a ride for him, maybe. Jake slipped down the steps and made for the corner of the tavern; just before he reached it, Amos Trimble's surrey, pulled by his smart bay, came into sight.

"How about a lift, Mr. Trimble?" called out Jake. The surrey moved on, the driver snuggled in a rug. "Hey, Mr. Trimble, it's Jake," Uncle Jake yelled. The bay started out at a brisk walk along the road beside the railway tracks. Jake stumbled and went into a drift; when he was up again, the surrey had gone round a turn. "What did I do tonight that Trimble doesn't speak?" thought Jake. It was a cold half-mile home.

And it still was cold next morning when Brice pulled Jake out of bed to give him another job. "A fellow got mixed up with a train at Tecumseh crossing, early today," said Brice. "That's what it looks like, though I can't figure out what train. He must have walked there—no sign of a horse. I don't know who. It's a mess, Jake; he's scattered for a hundred yards."

Tecumseh crossing was halfway between the New Devon depot and Trimble's farm. The man, or what had been one, was only patches in

the snow, Jake told me. Jake went along carefully with a basket, picking up everything; when he worked, he earned his pay. He and Brice came to a boot; Brice looked at it and gave a moan: "Trimble's." Jake never talked much. "Can't be," he said. "Trimble's not the kind." Jake found the other boot. "Not his," he said, but he didn't look at it closely.

It was Jake, too, who came to the head, with the black beard all stiff, and, in spite of dirt and blood, the scar still clear over the right eye. "Oh, God, Mr. Trimble; oh, God, Mr. Trimble, not you," was all Jake could say that day. The surrey was in the stable at Little Egypt; Trimble hadn't been sober enough to drive, the people there said. And what was Jake's word? He'd been lying in the snow on the porch like a sick hog. Brice had to go on with the work alone. He found everything, at last, except one thumb.

What was done? What you'd expect, with no more to go on. Russell could talk to Slattery, but Dan had his story. Lacking proof, there was no point in rousing Slattery's gang, in the lonely winter, with Russell the only officer in town. Jake might have done something, if he hadn't been married to the bottle. As it was, he kept clear of Little Egypt most of the time.

And here is where I fit into the picture — though I didn't know it was a picture, at the time. Spring came early that year. Sam Johnston — Baldy Johnston's little boy — and I were like a couple of cubs out of a cave, and got to wrestling in the mud of the back yard of Little Egypt. Sam was fatter, and got me down, and bounced on me. Jake came along and looked at us. "What'll I do, Uncle Jake?" I asked him.

"If I was in your place, Roy," he said, "I'd eat my way out. Sam's nose is mighty close to you." Sam gave a yell, and jumped off, and Jake walked on. Both Sam and I had had enough, so we started to plague Baldy Johnston's old cat, which was in the yard with us.

The cat was playing with something when Sam pulled it by the tail. I grabbed the thing it had been pushing around. At first I didn't

know what it was. But when I turned it over, I saw the nail. It was shrunken and dry, but it was a man's thumb. I let it drop.

Sam bawled for his mother. She came out and took a look at the thing; you wouldn't have thought much could upset Baldy Johnston, but she opened her mouth to scream and then stopped herself, white as a tablecloth. "Dan!" she screeched, instead. Dan stepped out of the taproom. His face didn't change. "That damned cat's been in the cellar," was all he said—all that I could make out. He muttered something else, lower, to Baldy.

"Why didn't you make sure?" said Baldy, furious.

"Don't worry," Dan told her. "The stove's hot." He picked up the thing in the dirt. Old Baldy shivered.

"No, you don't, Dan," she said. "Get a spade." She and Dan looked at us, and Sam and I made tracks out of there. Sam's mother must have taught him not to talk, and I didn't say anything. When I was a kid, I had nobody really to talk with, anyhow; and I was scared this time, though I didn't understand why.

It could have been evidence, but no one else knew. There was one other piece of proof somewhere, maybe: Russell thought of the note Trimble had scribbled at his house, before he went to Little Egypt the last time. Russell and Jake and Brice had seen him write something. But where had he put it? It wasn't in the clothes they found along the tracks, and it didn't turn up at the house. Nobody had any idea of what Trimble had written. Russell was ready to quit.

As the months went by, Jake drifted back to Little Egypt and drowned himself in Baldy Johnston's raw whiskey. One afternoon early in July, Jake was playing poker with Fellows and two other boozers—a rough game, with plenty of money on the table. Cane was at the bar, talking with Slattery. A lucky day for Jake. After three hands, everything went his way. Ordinarily he was a bad player; this day it seemed to him as if someone were looking over his shoulder and giving him tips, the queer feeling that gamblers sometimes have. All said, something peculiar hung about Little Egypt that afternoon. Jake always could feel what was in the air; and Slattery seemed to

know something was odd, too, shifting back and forth behind the bar, spoiling for a fight.

Red Fellows never could take a licking at cards. When Jake threw down the deuce, he set up a howl: "What's going on, you midget? I already played the deuce." It was all wind, but both he and Jake were ready to make something of it; Little Egypt was on their nerves.

"The hell," said Jake, pushing back his chair and reaching for the money. "My deuce." Fellows picked up a big schooner of beer from the table and let fly at Jake's head.

Jake wasn't tall, but he was thick where it counted. The schooner scratched the red cap Jake wore. Jake reached across the table, hoisted Fellows up, spun him round, and let him fly into the front window. Fellows broke half a dozen bottles when he landed.

"If you're going to kill him, don't kill him in here," yelled Slattery, coming over the bar. Jake was sick of Slattery. He heaved a chair at Bloody Dan.

The chair missed Dan; it brushed a lighted lamp and knocked it on the floor. Dan went after Jake, but Jake was quick for a man of his build, and sidestepped. They sparred round the floor while Fellows crawled out of the window, pulling glass from his pants. Then they started to cough, and found they couldn't see to fight—the smoke was too thick. The lamp had set Little Egypt afire.

Flame in one corner, smoke everywhere. The two other boys who'd been in the game got out the door and ran for help. Cane went for a bucket of water at the pump, and Jake and Fellows and Slattery tried smothering the flames with a couple of rag rugs. But it was old wood, Little Egypt. The fire spread, and all of a sudden an awful yowl came up from somewhere. "My God, who's that?" asked Jake, coughing harder. Slattery swung round, but Jake couldn't see his face for the smoke. The yowl came again, and someone opened the door of the back room, though Jake couldn't make out who was coming in—Cane, probably.

"Hell, it's only the cat, scared silly down below," Fellows grunted, beating at the fire with a broom. He was at the far side of the room. "Get a move on with that water, Cane!"

But Jack Cane didn't come in. The back-room door swung to again; and someone said, through the smoke, "Why don't you get us out of the cellar, Slattery?" The closing of the door muffled whatever else was said, and Jake was too busy with his rug to pay much attention; but the voice was nothing like Cane's.

"Dan!" said Fellows. He had dropped his broom, and was leaning against the wall, too startled by something even to swear. "Dan, who was that? It sounded like . . ."

"Shut up, damn you," Dan told him; but he whispered it. Slattery was crouched in the middle of the floor, ignoring the fire, watching the back-room door. "I couldn't see a thing. It must of been Jack." The door did not open again.

"Come on, Dan!" howled Jake, who was getting hot, what with the fire gaining. "Grab that rug!" But Dan stood there, staring at the door. Jake beat at the fire; and then a crowd of section-hands ran in with buckets of water. Little Egypt had one inside wall burnt nearly through, but nothing worse. By the time Jake got the smoke out of his eyes, Dan and Fellows were standing outside by the porch, saying nothing but letting other people finish the fire. "Say, where's Cane?" asked Fellows, after a while.

They looked in the back room, but found not hide nor hair of Jack Cane. Nobody in New Devon saw Cane from that time on. About two o'clock was the time the fire started in Little Egypt. At ten past two, the Detroit train came into New Devon. Just before it whistled—so Rowson, the ticket agent, told people—Cane ran into the depot and bought a ticket. He looked over his shoulder, and swore at Rowson for being slow, and grabbed his ticket and made the train. He didn't take anything with him. Why he went, nobody knew, and nobody ever had a chance to ask him. Two weeks later, Cane was dead in a rooming house in Chicago: some said bad liquor, some said carbolic acid. Nobody knew why.

Maybe Dan Slattery had some idea why Cane ran for the train. Dan kept mum during the next week. He took to shaking his head, as if he were saying "no" to himself. He stood at a spot behind the old bar where he could see down Depot Street, in front of Little Egypt.

He watched, but he didn't say what for. He watched all week. Nothing he was watching for came.

"Who you expecting, Slattery?" Jake said to him, when he was feeling high. "You watching for Russell? Or Cane? Or who?"

"Shut up," said Slattery. He kept on watching. When he thought Jake was looking the other way, he shook his head to himself.

Brice had been made executor of Mr. Trimble's estate; and it took him a long time to clear up some of Trimble's affairs. He spent a day, almost every week, going through receipts and vouchers and notes in the library at Trimble's dark old house, though he didn't like being there. Brice was used to dead bodies, but not to houses that seemed as if they were going to start talking any minute. Nearly a month after the fire at Little Egypt, Brice came puffing up the street toward Russell's office and saw Jake going the other way and told him to come along; there might be a job for him.

They hurried into Russell's place, Jake not knowing what it was all about; and Deputy Russell, seeing Brice's face, said, "Something special?"

"I found something in a Bible at the Trimble house," Brice told him, pulling a scrap of paper out of his vest pocket.

Russell took the paper, but didn't unfold it for a minute. "Didn't know you were a Bible reader, Brice," said Russell, who was one.

"It wasn't me that took the Bible off the shelf." Brice said it as if someone were going to call him a liar. "Somebody put it in the middle of Trimble's desk, open. I never touched a book in that house."

"Anybody been there since you left last week?" Russell asked him. Not that he knew of, said Brice. Russell and Brice looked at each other a second. "Just where was this paper stuck?" said Russell.

"What made you ask that?" Brice said. "It's a funny thing. I wrote down the book, chapter, and verse: Ezekiel, seventh chapter, eighth verse, at the top of the page. Look it up."

Russell took his own Bible from the whatnot in the corner, and read aloud to Brice and Jake: "Now will I shortly pour out my fury

upon thee and accomplish mine anger upon thee; and I will judge thee according to thy ways, and will recompense thee for all thy abominations."

"Let's see that paper," was all Jake had to say. Russell unfolded it. It didn't look as if it had been in a Bible for a while; it looked fresh, hardly creased. Russell said as much to Brice.

"I hope to die if that isn't where I found it," Brice told them. "I know what it says, but read it."

Russell did: "Jingo on the stove. Two men, backs turned; another at door. McCunn's cutter."

"Whose writing?" asked Brice.

"Trimble's, looks like," said Russell. "Let's move. I'm going over to talk with Larry McCunn. You two get hold of some men and drift around Little Egypt. Watch the doors."

Russell drove off, whipping up his horse, toward McCunn's; Jake was game for trouble, and he rounded up two other fellows, and with Brice they went toward Little Egypt.

Larry McCunn was a washed-out sort, scared of his shadow, and Russell didn't have to talk to him long. On the day Jingo Criminy died, McCunn's cousin Red Fellows had borrowed McCunn's horse and cutter. Fellows and Cane and Slattery weren't the boys McCunn could say no to, or the boys he could blab about afterward. McCunn told Russell all he knew, and then Russell let him go and rode for Little Egypt.

The saloon still was smoked up from the fire, and the door was sagging, and Russell never saw a fouler, tougher place. There wasn't a soul inside but Fellows, half asleep. Russell was glad of that. He sat down opposite Fellows and asked where Bloody Dan was. "At the butcher shop, I guess," Fellows told him.

"Then maybe you won't hang, Red," said Russell. "McCunn had a talk with me. There's you and Slattery. Slattery's enough to hang."

Fellows gave in; something had been eating him since Cane ran away. He whined like an old hound. "It was Dan planned it. Dan finished Jingo that way. It was Dan that got behind Trimble." He talked on, while Russell nodded. Then, of a sudden, Russell knew

somebody else was in the saloon, and he looked over Fellows's shoulder. The back-room door stood open; Bloody Dan had come in; he had his meat-axe in his hand.

Russell knocked over his chair and ran for the door. Fellows twisted round, and squealed, and got up, but not soon enough. Slattery split him.

Russell went down the front steps like water over a dam. Jake and Brice picked him up, and the other men bunched together, watching the doorway. "For God's sake," Russell called to the men in back of the tavern, "don't let Dan slip out that way." A crowd was outside now—women and boys, and half the men in town. "Well," said Russell, "we better go after him, if we don't want him coming out on us."

People looked at Jake, who was swinging a blacksmith's hammer. "Come on," said Jake, and went up the steps.

Fellows was in front of the bar, and his head was in two pieces. "I thought Dan used that axe on Mr. Trimble," was what Jake said. Dan? Nowhere. Not in the back room or the kitchen. Four men with guns went through the rooms upstairs, peeking round corners; but they turned out only Baldy and little Sam. Everybody had his mind on that meat-axe: Little Egypt was dark and Dan was fast.

"It'll be the cellar," said Jake. They gathered around the trap in the back-room floor. "Sure as hell he's down there." Nobody spoke above a whisper.

"I think there's a little window to the cellar on the north side," Russell said. "I'll see if I can get through that way. Anybody willing to try the trap at the same time?" He and Brice looked at Jake, who spat and shifted to his other foot.

"Dan's got the axe and maybe a gun," Jake told them. "Burn the skunk out." He reached for the oven door.

"No, it ain't lawful," Russell said. "We got to go after him."

"All right," said Jake. "But break the glass in that window the minute you see my legs on the ladder. And close the trap behind me, boys; I don't want Dan sighting on me."

Russell ran out. They opened the cellar door; Jake waited a bit, and then heard a pane break, and scooted down the ladder into the dark. And as he went down, and as the trap closed above him, everyone heard a screech: a screech that shook the floor and froze every man and made Jake slip when halfway down the ladder and fall to the dirt at the bottom.

"Not Slattery, if I know Slattery," Brice said, up in the back room. They had left the trap just a bit ajar, so that Jake could have a glint of light.

Jake huddled at the bottom, looking out for Dan's axe, and for whatever had screeched. It was an old stone cellar, full of cobwebs and broken bottles. Jake could see no one; but as his eyes became used to the darkness, he made out an open hole in the corner, probably a dry cistern, and not very deep. Had they put what was left of Trimble there, before they drove the surrey to the crossing? Jake crawled to the edge, expecting to feel that axe any second.

There they were: one man flat on the cistern bottom, looking as if he'd been broken in the middle, and the other tugging at him, so as to lift the body the five or six feet to the lip of the cistern. Dan was the smashed man; his axe was away at the far side of the hole. Jake took a real breath for the first time since he'd gone through the trap. "That's a good job, Russell," Jake said. "Shove Dan up, and I'll pull."

Now the man down in the dark below had Slattery's big body over his shoulders. He straightened slowly, and brought the dead man almost level with Jake's face. Dan's head flopped on one side: the neck was broken. Jake caught hold of the shoulders and began to pull. Just then, Russell said, "Jake, are you there? Is that you? I can't get through the damned window."

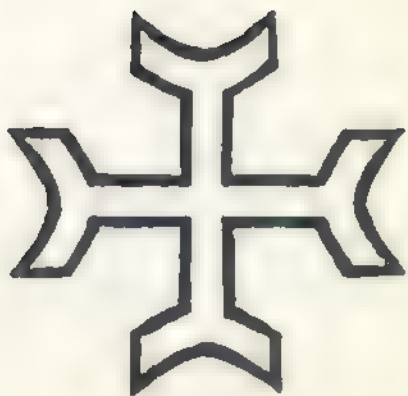
For a quarter of a second, Jake looked around to where Russell's voice came from. Yes, Russell was looking through the little window; he still was outside the cellar, too fat to crawl through. Jake snapped his head back toward the cistern as quick as an owl. The man in the hole was shoving Slattery's body toward him, and as he rose under

the weight, he and Jake came face to face, a foot or two apart. The man in the cistern had a black beard; and he had green eyes; and he had a little puckering scar running up from one eyelid. Jake saw this, and he sucked in his breath, and let go Dan's body; and it fell back into the cistern. Then Jake was at the foot of the ladder, and up in two jumps, and into the back room.

Jake broke the neck off a bottle of whiskey, and poured it down himself, but no one could get a word out of him except "Trimble, Trimble, Trimble." Brice and two other men went down the ladder; they found Dan dead with a broken neck and a broken back in the little cistern, and nothing else. Russell still was at the window, pointing a shotgun through: all he had seen was Jake, or somebody he took to be Jake, kneeling by the cistern and then diving for the ladder.

That's all. What do you expect me to tell you? Jake never drank again. No one lived in Trimble's house afterward, for his mark was on it. It's been twenty years since it burned. All the rest of his life Jake watched, the way Slattery watched for a week or two; but nothing ever came to him. They're all in the graveyard now, Uncle Jake and the lot, and before you know it, I'll be with them. And because I never had powers like Amos Trimble's, I'll lie easy there.

EX TENEBRIS



Then shall it be too late to knock when the door shall be shut; and too late to cry for mercy when it is the time of justice. O terrible voice of the most just judgment which shall be pronounced upon them, when shall it be said unto them, Go ye cursed into the fire everlasting, which is prepared for the devil and his angels.

A COMMINATION, OR DENOUNCING
OF GOD'S ANGER AND JUDGMENTS
AGAINST SINNERS

ONLY ONE ROOF at Low Wentford is sound today. On either side of the lane, a row of stone cottages stands empty. Twenty years ago there were three times as many; but now the rest are rubble. A gutted shell of Victorian masonry is the ruin of the schoolhouse. Close by the brook, the church of All Saints stares drearily into its desolate graveyard; a good fifteenth-century building, All Saints, but the glass smashed in its windows and the slates slipping one after another from the roof. It has been deconsecrated all this century. Beside it, the vicarage—after the soldiers quartered there had finished with it—was demolished for the sake of what its woodwork and fittings would bring.

In the last sound cottage lives Mrs. Oliver, an ancient little woman with a nose that very nearly meets her chin. She wears a country-woman's cloak of the old pattern, and weeds her garden, and sometimes walks as far as the high-arched bridge which, built long before the cottages, has survived them. Mrs. Oliver has no neighbors nearer than the Oghams of Wentford House, a mile down a bedraggled avenue of limes and beeches twisting through the neglected park to the stables of that Queen Anne mansion.

Nearly three years ago, Sir Gerald Ogham sold the cottage to Mrs. Oliver, who had come back from Madras to the village where she was born. In all the parish, no one remained who remembered Mrs. Oliver. She had gone out to India with her husband, the Major; no one knew how long ago that had been—not even Mrs. Oliver, perhaps—with any precision, for she had known Sir Gerald's father, but had grown vague about decades and such trifles. Sir Gerald himself, though he was past sixty, could recollect of her only that her name had been an old one in the village.

Village? Like the money of the Oghams, it had faded quite away: the Ogham fortunes and Low Wentford now were close to extinction. The wealth of the Oghams was gone to wars and the Exchequer; the last of the villagers had been drained away to the mills at Gorst, when tractors had supplanted horses upon the farms which Sir Gerald had sold to a potato syndicate. Behind the shutters of the sixty rooms of Wentford House, a solitary daily woman did what she could to supply the place of twenty servants. Lady Ogham and the gardener and the gardener's boy grew flowers and vegetables in the walled garden, to be sold in Gorst; Sir Gerald, with a feckless bailiff and a half-dozen laborers, struggled to wrest a few hundred pounds' income from the home farm and the few fields he had left besides. The family name still meaning something roundabout, Sir Gerald sat in the county council, where he sided with a forlorn minority overborne by the councillors from sprawling Gorst.

Sir Gerald had tried to sell the other habitable cottages in Low Wentford; but the planning officer, backed by the sanitary officer, had put obstacles in the way. And it was only because they had been unable at the time to provide a council-flat for old Mrs. Oliver that they had permitted her to repair the cottage near the church. The windows were too small, the sanitary officer and the planning officer had said; but Mrs. Oliver had murmured that in Madras she had seen enough of the sun to last her all her days. The ceilings were lower than regulations specified; but Mrs. Oliver had replied that the coal ration would go the further for that. It must be damp, the sanitary officer felt sure; but he was unable to prove it. There were

no communal amenities, said the planning officer; but Mrs. Oliver, deaf as well as dim of sight, told him she disliked Communists. The authorities yielding, Mrs. Oliver had moved in with her Indian keepsakes and her few sticks of furniture, proceeding to train rosebushes against the old walls and to spade her own little garden; for, despite her great age, she was not feeble of body or of will.

Mr. S. G. W. Barner, Planning Officer, had a will of his own, nevertheless, and he had made up his mind that not one stone was to be left upon another at Low Wentford. With satisfaction he had seen the last of the farm-laborers of that hamlet transferred to the new council-houses at Gorst, where there was no lack of communal facilities, including six cinemas. Thus were they integrated with the progressive aspirations of planned industrial society, he told the county council. Privately, he was convinced that the agricultural laborer ought to be liquidated altogether. And why not? Advanced planning, within a few years, surely would liberate progressive societies from dependence upon old-fashioned farming. He disliked the whole notion of agriculture, with its rude earthiness, its reactionary views of life and labor, its subservience to tradition. The agricultural classes would be absorbed into the centers of population, or otherwise disposed of; the land thus placed at public command would be converted into garden cities, or state holiday-camps, or proving grounds for industrial and military experiment.

With a positive passion of social indignation then, S. G. W. Barner—a thick-chested, hairy man, forever carrying a dispatch-case, stooping and heavy of tread, rather like a large, earnest ape (as Sir Gerald had observed to Lady Ogham, after an unpleasant encounter at a county council meeting)—objected against Mrs. Oliver's tenancy of the little red-tiled cottage. His consolation had been that she had not long to live, being wrinkled and gnarled amazingly. To his chagrin, however, she seemed to thrive in the loneliness of Low Wentford, her cheeks growing rosier, her step more sure. She must be got out of that cottage by compulsory purchase, if nothing else would serve. On Mr. Barner's maps of the Rural District of Low Wentford as it would be in the future, there remained no

vexatious dots to represent cottages by the old bridge; nor was there any little cross to represent the derelict church. (No church had yet been erected in the newest housing scheme at Gorst: Cultural Amenities must yield pride of place to material requirements, Barner had declared.)

Yes, that wreck of a church must come down, with what remained of Low Wentford. Ruins are reminiscent of the past; and the Past is a dead hand impeding progressive planning. Besides, Low Wentford had been a hamlet immediately dependent upon Wentford House and its baronets, and therefore ought to be effaced as an obsolete fragment of a repudiated social order. It was disconcerting that even a doddering creature like the obdurate Mrs. Oliver should prefer living in this unhealthy rurality; and now a council-flat could be made available to her. She would be served a compulsory purchase order before long, if the Planning Officer had his way—which he was accustomed to have—and would be moved to Gorst where she belonged. The surviving cottages might be condemned to demolition as a public nuisance, Sir Gerald's obscurantism notwithstanding. What should be done with the cleared site of Low Wentford? Why, it might be utilized as a dump for earth excavated in the Gorst housing schemes. That obsolete bridge, incidentally, ought to be replaced by a level concrete one.

"Let a decent old woman keep her roses," Sir Gerald had said to the Planning Officer when last they met in Gorst. "Why do you whirl her off to your jerry-built desolation of concrete roadways that you've designed, so far as I can see, to make it difficult for people to get about on foot? Why do you have to make her live under the glare of mercury-vapor lamps and listen to other people's wireless sets when she wants quiet? Sometimes I think a devil's got inside you, Barner."

With dignity, S. G. W. Barner felt, he had replied to this tirade. "I am very much afraid, Sir Gerald, that you don't understand the wants of common human beings. Elderly members of the community need to be kept under the supervision of social workers and local authorities, for their own welfare; indeed, I trust the time is not far

distant when residence in eventide homes will be compulsory upon all aged persons, regardless of fancied social distinctions. Mrs. Oliver requires relief from her self-imposed isolation."

"You're no better than a walking bluebook, Barner," Sir Gerald Ogham had answered—red as a beet, the Planning Officer recollected with relish—and had stamped away. Opposition from such a quarter was sufficient evidence of the need for taking Mrs. Oliver and Low Wentford in hand so soon as the Council would be wheedled into action. He must find time to draw up a persuasive report on the redundancy of Low Wentford.

In truth, Low Wentford *was* a lonely place, as Mrs. Oliver confessed to herself, though she knew it never would do to tell Mr. Barner so. Some things she seemed to forget, nowadays, but she knew whom she could trust and whom she could not. Lady Ogham came to visit her occasionally, bringing a present of fruit or flowers; otherwise, Mrs. Oliver was quite alone. Despite being deaf and nearsighted and English, she had enjoyed more company in Madras. How long was it since the Major had gone? She had little notion. Sometimes children, straggling down from the potato-syndicate farm, ran from her in fright, here in the village where she had been born; children never had dreaded her in Madras.

But she wanted no more visits from the Planning Officer. She knew what he was about. He had come last week—or was it last month?—and she had made him shout properly, saying she was sorry to be deaf, though really she had understood him well enough when he spoke in a lower key. She had shaken her head again and again and again. She had bought this cottage, and it was hers, and she loved her roses, and she did not want to be cared for. He had turned from her quite disagreeable. It was something about maps. And communal amenities. He would not stay for tea, although she had told him that she still baked her own bread. Mr. Barner was a cheerless man, and he frightened her. Had he said something about an old witch when he banged the door after him?

Certainly he had said he was out of patience. Almost nothing in India had frightened her: the riots would not have made her come home; it was only that she had longed to see the country round Low Wentford, even though all the old neighbors were gone. But she was afraid of Mr. Barner, because he seemed more unchristian than any Indian, worshipping his maps. And he might do something about her cottage. Sir Gerald, if she had understood him properly, had said as much. She would not go to Gorst; it was not a nice place, not nice at all, even when she was young. And naughty children in such places pointed at her nose, and at her stick. If only there were a neighbor or two. . . . Sir Gerald and Lady Ogham were busy people; and, too, she needed someone less grand. Why was it that the vicar never came to call? Though she had been reared a Methodist, she could recollect the plump old vicar of All Saints, Low Wentford. Was it he who had married her to the Major? She thought so. But she supposed that he, like the Major, was gone. Perhaps the vicar could have helped her against Mr. S. G. W. Barner. Really, she had come to hate Mr. Barner. She had been reasonably good most of her life, and so felt entitled to hate a man or two, at her age. Parsons knew how to manage such people. Did the vicar know she was living in Low Wentford again? Had anyone told him?

He must have more than one parish, surely, and have been too busy to call upon her as yet. For the church was locked always. She had tried the door a number of times, especially on Sundays, but it never yielded. She supposed the vicar must come late Sunday evening, after she had gone to bed; indeed, she thought—though she could not be sure—that she had seen lights, like little candles, moving within the church, once or twice when she had risen in the middle of the night to shut a window against the rain. Doubtless he would call eventually, this poor harried vicar, and she would give him tea and her own scones. Meanwhile, she had her cat to talk with; and a fine great cat he was, named Bentinck, and she could tell Bentinck of the iniquities of Mr. Barner. The milkman came in the morning, and the grocer's van in the afternoon—that was company. But the vanmen were ever so shy: you would have thought them

afraid of her. Should she fall ill, now, the vicar would be duty bound to call on her. Her health invariably was good, however—more's the pity—better than ever it had been in Madras. Lady Ogham told her, laughing a little, that she was so hale and rosy she seemed more than human. "My flowers and my oven keep me brisk, Lady Ogham," she had said, stroking Bentinck.

Though it had been disused for years before she came, the cottage oven was a good one. She baked little sweet cakes of all shapes and dimensions. Being very ill-tempered the day after Mr. Barner had visited her, she had made of dough one cake that looked quite like the Planning Officer, and deliberately left it too long in the oven so that it burnt black, and Bentinck would not touch it even when it was soaked in milk. But that had been spiteful. She wished she did not have to think about Mr. Barner. Perhaps if she went out of the cottage more often, he would not come creeping into her mind. She ought to cross to the churchyard every evening, to forget the poor menaced cottage for a while; and there she might look at the tombstones, if she should take a little broom with her to brush the leaves away. She knew many of the folk that lay by the church, and it would be pleasant to sit among them in the sunset.

When had she decided this? Had it been last autumn? Or had it been only a fortnight ago? Nowadays she came daily, before sunset, to the churchyard and swept the gravestones. It being March, often rain came while she was there; then she sat in the south porch of the church, wrapped in her cloak and hood, and took no harm. Always the church door was locked, but that did not much matter, for everyone whose name she could remember was buried to the south of the church, not inside. She brushed with her little broom, and found Aunt Polly and Grandfather Thomas, and Ann with whom she had played in the schoolyard, and even the plump old vicar, who, she recalled now, had been the Reverend Henry Williams. But they were not altogether satisfactory as neighbors, for of course she could see them only in memory, and they could not answer. They did not succeed in keeping Mr. S. G. W. Barner from creeping into the back of her mind. He was detestable.

Except for the fallen limbs of old rowans and the high damp grass, the south side of the churchyard was a cheerful place, far better than the north side. The graves were few on that latter cold and windy slope, and the weeds were thicker, and everything seemed squalid. She would have liked to tell the vicar so. A small porch clung to that side of the church, too, but she dared not sit there, for even she could perceive that the heavy porch roof threatened to collapse. Probably Sir Gerald Ogham was not able to maintain All Saints as his father had done. A little low archway—she supposed it was the Normans' work—led from the porch into the tower. Sometimes it seemed to her that the door in the archway was ajar; but she could not make certain, for when she approached once, a slate fell right at her feet, and she feared she might bring the whole porch down upon her head. If this was the way the vicar entered the church, he must be rather a heedless man. She could not remember this door ever having been opened when she was a girl.

No, she did not like the north side. Having swept all the grave-stones to the south, however, she felt that really she ought to treat the folk on the north equally well. One evening, then, she found herself brushing the thick wet leaves from a slab close by the north porch. Was there a name upon it? She put on her spectacles and, leaning on her stick, bent as close as she could. Then a shadow fell across the slab.

Mrs. Oliver turned sharp round, thinking that perhaps Mr. Barner had come again. But it was someone else: a parson, a tall man with a long, long face, hatched lines crossing on forehead and cheeks. She could see him more plainly than she could see most people. He must have come from the little doorway under the tower. He was nothing like the old vicar, Mr. Williams. This would be his successor, and it was good that he had come. Drops of moisture ran from his long black hair down the furrows in his sad face, so he must have walked a great way in the rain.

"I am Mrs. Oliver," she said. Why did she have trouble getting the words out?

Though clear, his voice was harsh and grating; he did not seem to

be speaking loudly, unlike everybody else, who shouted at her. "I am Abner Hargreaves," he said, "your vicar."

"Something curious happened today," Sir Gerald Ogham remarked to his wife, at dinner. He stared at a place on the high ceiling where the faded Chinese paper was peeling, and paused, as if he regretted having spoken.

"Well?" said Lady Ogham. "You know, this room is falling to bits. What was strange?"

"Mrs. Oliver was odd," Sir Gerald told her. "You'd best say nothing of this to anyone, Alice: if Barner knew, it might improve his case."

"Odd? I always have thought her a sensible old dear, aside from her way of talking to that monstrous cat as though he were a viceroy."

"Perhaps it was only some person passing through the village on his way to Gorst," Sir Gerald went on. "But she said the vicar came to call, yesterday evening, and took tea with her."

"Vicar? Whom could she have meant, Gerald? Mr. Harris of Holy Trinity, in Gorst?"

"Harris has nothing to do with this parish; besides, he scarcely bothers to call anywhere in Gorst. He knows he has emoluments to receive, but forgets he has duties to perform. He never would have been poking about a deconsecrated church. And you know what a frail reed Harris is, while this fellow seems to have been a strapping parson of the old breed. Mrs. Oliver was quite overawed by him; I had thought nothing could make such a distinct impression on her—though she did forget his name while she was talking with me. I wish I had seen him. It never would do for word to get about that Mrs. Oliver talks with shadows: in no time, Barner would have her off to some insufferable eventide home. Yet I do believe—if I understood her—that she fancies the church still is in use."

"Oh, no, Gerald, really she can't! It must have been shut when she was a girl here."

"No, All Saints has not been derelict that long. I was a half-grown

boy before they locked it. Even then, it was in a bad way; almost no one but our family used to attend. There were few parishioners left about Low Wentford, and the vicar offended most of those few. He was remarkably harsh, fond of nothing but the cursing psalms and Jeremiah. I recollect a commination, on Ash Wednesday—which, by the way, is nearly upon us again, Alice—that gave me nightmares. Then the scandal put an end to things, and they took the furniture and the bells away to Gorst. One of these days the whole roof will fall through.”

“You never told me of a scandal.”

“A nasty story, Alice. The village schoolmaster was the village atheist—Rally was his name, or Reddy. The vicar loathed this schoolmaster, who, he said, was corrupting the parish. It was against Reddy the vicar preached that commination I remember. How he cursed him! When Reddy heard what had been said, he came round to face the vicar out. Both of them had beastly tempers.

“During the first week of Lent, Reddy was found in the brook by the bridge, his neck broken. Like most convinced atheists, he drank, however, and he might have fallen from the bridge to the stones, in the night.”

“Do you mean the poor vicar was slandered merely on that coincidence?”

“No. Of itself, Reddy’s death might have been passed over. Even the vicar’s death might have been passed over; for he was found drowned in our quarry six months later. He might have been bathing. It was a clause in his will that caused the talk—that, and his sermons and the look on his face for months before. He left instructions that he should be buried on the north side of the church, ‘with other murderers and perjurers and suicides, that burn forever.’ The vicar was eloquent, as if inspired by angels; but what sort of angels, people wondered. How he talked of sinners in the hands of an angry God! Whatever he was, he thundered like the agent of Omnipotence. Yet Satan, for that matter . . . I believe his name was Harbound, or Harcourt, or Harbottle; but it doesn’t signify any longer, except conceivably to the vicar himself, poor damned soul.”

Nearly every evening, now, Mr. Hargreaves came to call and Mrs. Oliver was comforted. Though he was in no sense a cheerful being, she was convinced that he possessed immense powers of sympathy. He sat moodily in his corner away from the fire, always dripping, somehow, even when Mrs. Oliver had thought the evening fair; and Mrs. Oliver told him her tribulations. He would eat nothing, yet he drank her tea with a prodigious thirst; and he seemed to need it, for his voice was fearfully dry and harsh; and to judge by his eyes, he suffered from malaria. She wished that she might hear him preach: he held a command of language she never before had encountered in a parson. But when she asked him about the hours of service, he did not seem to hear her. Bentinck, temperamental, wailed whenever Mr. Hargreaves entered, fleeing to the top of the cupboard, whence he spat at the vicar; but the Reverend Abner Hargreaves took no notice of the cat. Now and again he spoke at length, with wonderful passion, as clearly as he had spoken when first they met in the churchyard; and he seemed to anticipate her every thought. Mr. Barner, she told the vicar, was a wicked man.

"Cursed is he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, the fatherless and widow," said Mr. Hargreaves.

"I wish you would speak to him," said Mrs. Oliver.

"All thine enemies shall feel thy hand; thy right hand shall find them out that hate thee," continued Mr. Hargreaves, almost chanting. "Thou shalt make them like a fiery oven in time of thy wrath; the Lord shall destroy them in his displeasure, and the fire consume them."

"I don't wish him any harm," said Mrs. Oliver, "but he is wicked."

At that, Mr. Hargreaves rose abruptly, and went out of the cottage into the night. Mrs. Oliver hoped that she had not somehow offended him. But at all times he came and went unceremoniously. No doubt Mr. Hargreaves was zealous; yet he was not quite a cheering vicar.

Mr. S. G. W. Barner sat in his study, amusing himself by drawing up plans for a model collective agricultural unit adapted to British agronomy — something he did not intend to show the county council,

nevertheless, or at least not to a council of its present complexion—when a bell rang, and rang again, faintly.

"Susan, *will* you answer that?" he called to his wife, in annoyance.

"Answer what, dear?" his wife inquired, from the corridor.

"The doorbell, of course," Barner told her, fidgeting with his ruler.

She was back in a moment. "No one . . ." Then he heard the faint bell again.

"The telephone, Susan," said Barner. "Must I manage every trifling detail in this household?" She bit her lip and hurried out.

"No one telephoned either," she called, in a moment. "And I never heard it ring, dear."

Flinging down his ruler, Barner strode into the hall, and snatched the receiver from her. "Nonsense! Of course it rang!" And someone was speaking, as he had expected. Barner nodded contemptuously to his wife, who shrank into the kitchen.

The voice was deep, afflicted with a parched hoarseness. For some seconds, Barner thought he had the receiver wrong end to, or that something was amiss with the instrument; but then the voice sounded more distinctly. ". . . without delay," it was saying. "I have spoken with Mrs. Oliver. The thing must be done with."

Barner gathered that the agent, whoever he was, desired a meeting. "Where?" asked Barner. This might be an opportunity to clear away the Low Wentford annoyance. "When?"

"At All Saints," said the voice, with something like a gasp, and then paused, almost as if the idea of Time (Barner wondered why this foolish fancy passed through his brain) were alien to the speaker. "We meet," said the parched voice, "at once."

"In the dark?" protested Barner. "You've called far too late. Tuesday, possibly."

"This night, at All Saints, Low Wentford." The voice, imperious, startled Barner.

"Whoever are you?" he asked.

"Hargreaves, the vicar. I am waiting." Then there was silence.

Barner put down the telephone after an attempt to remonstrate to the void.

Well, the hour would do well enough, after all; but he would be short with this cantankerous vicar. Vicar of what? Barner knew no Hargreaves. Some relative, conceivably, of Mrs. Oliver. He was tempted to let the silly parson, with his bad manners, wait all night in the churchyard. Then, though, he might lose his chance to finish with Low Wentford. Telling his wife that he would return in an hour or two, Barner got into his automobile and drove out of the villadom that hems in Gorst toward Low Wentford.

As Barner switched off his ignition, it occurred to him that the churchyard of All Saints was a cheerless place to meet this fellow. The mist from the brook drifted upwards toward the church. Could they not have talked in that old woman's confounded cottage? It was wet here, and hard to tell hair from stone. With proper employment of scientific methodology, one day society would plan its weather, perhaps eliminating altogether the seasons. But for the stupidity of entrenched interests, the thing would have been accomplished already. Superstition! Today, for instance, was some irrational relic of superstitious rubbish—Ash Wednesday, that was it. Barner walked through the tangled grass toward the south porch. He saw no one. Would this vicar have a key to let them in, or must they parley in the drizzle?

No one stood in this porch. Barner thought he caught a glimmer of light within the church; but this door was bolted. He blundered round to the north side. As he approached the small porch by the tower, someone stalked out to meet him.

The vicar was a man of great stature; it was too dark for Barner to perceive much more of him, though he recognized at once the parched and rasping voice. "I ask you, sir, for charity," said this vicar, out of the fog.

"If you mean that old woman down the lane, Mr. Hargreaves," Barner interrupted, "the most charitable thing we can do is to

rehouse her where amenities and social intercourse are available." Though the vicar had come up close to him, Barner could not see his face well enough, through the mist, to make out his cast of countenance. It would be the face of a sentimental fool, Barner knew. They stood in the lee of the north porch, the grass up to their knees, some slippery slab underfoot; and a wind had risen, damply cutting.

"Who are you, sir," the vicar went on—his throat seemingly dry as an oven—"and what am I, to meddle with an old woman's longing? She called me from a great way to do her this service; and I must have your charity, or else you must seek mine; and now I have none to give. 'Cursed is he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, the fatherless and widow.' Do you know the verse which stands next to that, man? It is this: 'Cursed is he that smiteth his neighbor secretly.' In the universe are vicars of more sorts than one, but I am bound by special ordinances; and therefore I do entreat you, sir, to call it to mind that this woman's house is as the breath of life to her. The breath of life, man. Think what that means!"

Well, reflected Barner, here's the old-world Bible-thumper with a vengeance. "Individual preferences often must be subordinated to communal efficiency," was what he said.

"I speak not simply of whim and inclination," the vicar caught him up, "but of the memories of childhood and girlhood, the pieties that cling to our hearth, however desolated."

"That's rot you're talking, you know," Barner objected, exasperated. Did the vicar step closer to him? Barner shifted backward through the grass, so that he stood just within the porch. "Candidly, I consider parsons just so many impediments to social unity. Leave sociology to trained minds, Mr. Hargreaves. I see you have not the faintest conception of the essentials of planning. I have an Act of Parliament at my back. Who authorized you to meddle with official programmes? Perhaps some people desire your services: old Mrs. Oliver, for instance, possibly extracts some solace from your Bible stories. I do not."

The vicar laughed. Barner never had heard a laugh like it—a sound nearer the braying of a mule than anything from a man's

throat. It was indescribably dismal. "Blind, blind," the vicar declared. "His fan is in his hand, and he will purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. For the sake of a void upon a map, man, would you cast away your hope of salvation?"

"Salvation?" asked Barner, with a shrug. "Salvation? I came to you for a practical settlement, not a sermon. I want that woman out of her cottage."

"I have said all that it was required I should say," the vicar answered, "and have done all that it was required I should do." His voice was exhortatory no longer; now a quality of devouring eagerness was in it. He took another step toward Barner, who at last saw his face distinctly.

A sentimental parson? Not this man. The jaw, long and rocklike; the cheeks, seamed and hollow; the pallid, pallid skin; the high-bridged nose, with distended nostrils; the red and staring eyes, with the look of a beast in torment—these were thrust close up to Barner's face in the gloom of the porch. Enormous beads of water or sweat ran down the vicar's cheeks.

"But I do ask you, this last time," said the vicar, "for charity."

Or did he say it? His lips had not moved. And abruptly it came to Barner that the vicar's lips had not stirred before; that rigid face was a mask; and the words Barner had thought he heard had sounded only in his own brain, not in his ears. Even on the telephone . . . Barner clutched a stone bench-end within the porch. What tricks the dark and the mist played! Of course the vicar's lips must have moved; no one would play ventriloquist in this place. "No," insisted Barner, scowling, his assurance partially recovered, "I never grant exceptions to any scheduled scheme." How loathsome that parson's features were! "I say, Vicar, if you must talk of this longer, shan't we shift out of this wind and wet into the church?" For Barner wanted mightily to put some interval between himself and that waxy face.

"Safe in the church? You and I? Never!" cried the parson, in a voice at once exultant and agonized. He smiled frightfully. "For now is the axe put to the root of the trees, so that every tree that bringeth

forth not good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire." Then he took Barner by the throat.

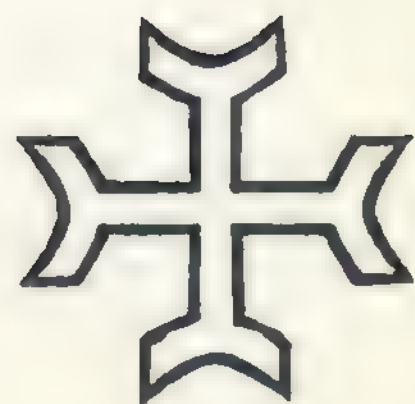
For more than a week, the curious death of S. G. W. Barner was a subject of conversation even beyond Gorst; the *Review of Collective Planning* observed that in Barner, pragmatic social reconstruction had lost one of its more promising younger advocates. Apparently Barner had been making a brief inspection of the derelict church of All Saints, which he intended to persuade the ecclesiastical authorities to demolish, when the roof of the north porch, weakened by incompetent restorers near the end of the eighteenth century and further imperilled by neglect, fell upon him. His body was not discovered until the following afternoon.

Two or three of Barner's acquaintances remarked that he would have been vexed by a cultural lag connected with his cremation. The suffragan bishop of Wandersley, within whose cure Gorst lies, recently had spoken with vigor against the "barbarous practice" of scattering the ashes, after cremation, at random over unconsecrated ground; while the Reverend John Harris, vicar of Holy Trinity, Old Gorst, protested against the strewing of ashes within his churchyard, as offensive to the sensibilities of his parishioners and his wife. The undertaker and Mrs. Barner, therefore, were in some perplexity, until Mr. Harris suggested that the churchyard of Low Wentford might be suitable, there being no clergyman in residence, and the only person who might possibly object being Sir Gerald Ogham. Consulted, Sir Gerald said that, the Ogham tombs lying to the south of All Saints, these ashes ought to be strewn on the north side of the churchyard. This was done; and Sir Gerald, though not present on the occasion, told the county sanitary officer that he thought no ceremony could have been more fitting.

The county council has relinquished the scheme for clearing the site of Low Wentford; indeed, there appears to be some possibility that six or seven of the cottages near the bridge may be restored, with the aid of grants from local authorities, as part of a plan of de-

concentration recommended by the new planning officer. Mrs. Oliver's cottage, in any event, seems secure. She weeds her garden, and bakes her scones, and often sweeps the gravestones clean; thus she continues surprisingly vigorous for a woman of her years. Though the vicar no longer calls, as she told Lady Ogham one day, instead she has a new confidant — a Mr. Reddy, highly opinionated, given to denying the existence of Heaven, and suffering dreadfully from some old injury to his neck.

BALGRUMMO'S HELL



*Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd
In one self place; for where we are is hell,
And where hell is, there we must ever be.*

THE MOMENT THAT Horgan had slipped through the pend, Jock Jamieson had glanced up, grunted, and run for his shotgun at the gate-cottage. But Horgan, having long legs, had contrived to cosh Jock right on the threshold. Now Horgan had most of the night to lift the pictures out of Balgrummo Lodging.

Before Jock could close those rusty iron gates, Nan Stennis—in her improbable role of new night nurse to Lord Balgrummo—had stalled her car in the pend. In the rain, Jock couldn't possibly have made out Nan's face, and now Horgan pulled off the silk stocking of Nan's that he had worn over his own head. With Nan's help, he trussed and gagged Jock, the tough old nut breathing convulsively, and dragged him into a kitchen cupboard of the gate-cottage and turned the key on him. Jock's morning mate, and the morning nurse, wouldn't come to relieve him until seven o'clock. That left no one between Horgan and those paintings except Alexander Fillan Inchburn, tenth Baron Balgrummo, incredibly old, incredibly depraved, and incredibly decayed in Balgrummo Lodging, which he had not left for half a century.

In that nocturnal February drizzle, Nan shivered; perhaps she shuddered. Though there could have been no one within a quarter of a mile to hear them, she was whispering. "Rafe, can you really get through it without me? I hate to think of you going into that place all alone, darling."

Competent Rafe Horgan kissed her competently. She had left her husband for him, and she had been quite useful. He honestly meant to meet her at the Mayfair, by the end of the month, and take her to the Canaries; by that time, he should have disposed of the Romney portrait for a fat sum, to an assured Swiss collector with a Leeds agent, enabling Horgan to take his time in disposing of the other Balgrummo pictures. Nan could have lent him a hand inside Balgrummo Lodging, but it was important for her to establish an alibi; she would change automobiles with him now, drive into Edinburgh and show herself at a restaurant, and then take the midnight train to King's Cross. The principal trouble with operations like this was simply that too many people became involved, and some of them were given to bragging. But Nan was a close one, and Horgan had spent months planning.

The only real risk was that someone might discover his name wasn't Horgan. For that, however, a thorough investigation would be required. And who would think of investigating the past of Rafe Horgan, Esq., a South African gentleman of private means who now lived in a pleasant flat near Charlotte Square? Not Dr. Euphemia Inchburn, grey spinster who liked his smile and his talk; not T. M. Gillespie, Writer to the Signet, chairman of the trustees of Lord Balgrummo's Trust. With them, he had been patient and prudent, asking questions about Balgrummo Lodging only casually, in an antiquarian way. Besides, did he look as if he would carry the cosh? No, the police would be after every gang in Fossie housing estate, which sprawled almost to the policies of Balgrummo Lodging. Horgan's expenditure of charm, and even of money, would be repaid five thousand times over. The big obstacle had been Jock's shotgun, and that was overcome now.

"His high and mighty lordship's bedridden," Horgan told Nan, kissing her again, "and blind, too, they say. I'll finish here by three o'clock, girl. Ring me about teatime tomorrow, if you feel you must; but simply talk about the weather, Nan, when you do. You'll love Las Palmas."

He stood at the forgotten gate, watching Nan get into the car in which he had come and had parked in the shadow of the derelict linoleum-works that ran cheek by jowl with the north dyke of Balgrummo Lodging. When she had gone, he started up Nan's own inconspicuous black Ford, moving it far enough for him to shut the gates. He locked those gates with the big brass padlock that Jock had removed to admit "Nurse" Nan. Then, slowly and with only his dims showing, he drove up the avenue—rhododendron jungle pressing in from either side—that led to the seventeenth-century façade of Balgrummo Lodging.

"Uncle Alec and his house have everything," Dr. Effie Inchburn had said once: "Dry rot, wet rot, woodworm, deathwatch beetle." Also, among those few who remembered Lord Balgrummo and Balgrummo Lodging, the twain had a most nasty repute. It was a positive duty to take the pictures out of that foul house and convey them into the possession of collectors who, if they would keep them no less private, certainly would care for them better.

Sliding out of the car with his dispatch-case of tools, Rafe Horgan stood at the dark door of Balgrummo Lodging. The front was the work of Sir William Bruce, they said, although part of the house was older. It all looked solid enough by night, however rotten the timbers and the man within. Horgan had taken Jamieson's big ring of keys from the gate-cottage, but the heavy main door stood slightly ajar, anyway. No light showed anywhere. Before entering, Horgan took a brief complacent survey of the tall ashlar face of what T. M. Gillespie, that mordant stick of a solicitor, called "Balgrummo's Hell."

Living well enough by his wits, Horgan had come upon Balgrummo Lodging by good fortune, less than a month after he had

found it convenient to roost in Edinburgh. In a car with false license-plates, he had driven out to Fossie housing estate in search of a certain rough customer who might do a job for him. Fossie, only seven years old but already slum, was the usual complex of crescents and terraces of drab council-houses. Horgan had taken a wrong turning and had found himself driving down a neglected and uninhabited old lane; behind the nasty brick wall on his right had been a derelict marshalling-yard for goods-waggon, declared redundant by Dr. Beeching of British Railways. On his left, he had passed the immense hulk of a disused linoleum-works, empty for several years, its every windowpane smashed by the lively bairns of Fossie.

Beyond the linoleum-factory, he had come upon a remarkably high old stone dyke, unpleasant shards of broken glass set thick in cement all along its top. Behind the wall he had made out the limbs and trunks of limes and beeches, a forest amidst suburbia. Abruptly, a formal ancient pend or vaulted gateway had loomed up. On either side, a seventeenth-century stone beast-effigy kept guard, life-size almost: a lion and a griffin, but so hacked and battered by young vandals as to be almost unrecognizable. The griffin's whole head was lacking.

So much Horgan had seen at a glance, taking it that these were the vacant policies of some demolished or ruined mansion-house. He had driven on to the end of the street, hoping to circle back to the housing estate, but had found himself in a cul-de-sac, the Fetting burn flowing through bogs beyond the brick wall at the end. This triangle of wooded policies, hemmed in by goods-yards, wrecked factory, and polluted streams, must be the last scrap of some laird's estate of yesteryear, swallowed but not yet digested by the city's fringe. Probably the squalor and unhealthiness of the low site had deterred Edinburgh or Midlothian—he wasn't sure within which boundary it lay—from building on it another clutch of council-houses for the Fossie scheme.

Swinging round the lane's terminal wall, Horgan had gone slowly back past the massive pend, where the harling was dropping from the rubble. To his surprise, he had noticed a gate-lodge, apparently

habitable, just within the iron grille of the gates; and a little wood-smoke had been spiralling up from the chimney. Could there be anything worth liberating beyond those gates? He had stopped, and had found an iron bell-pull that functioned. When he had rung, a tall fellow, with the look of a retired constable, had emerged from the gate-cottage and had conversed with him, taciturnly, in broad Scots, through the locked grille.

Horgan had asked for directions to a certain crescent in the housing-scheme, and had got them. Then he had inquired the name of this place. "Balgrummo Lodgin', sir"—with a half-defensive frown. On impulse, Horgan had suggested that he would like to see the house (which, he gathered, must be standing, for he could make out beyond the trees some high dormers and roofs).

"Na, na; Himself's no receivin', ye ken." This had been uttered with a kind of incredulity at the question being put.

Growing interested, Horgan had professed himself to be something of a connoisseur of seventeenth-century domestic architecture. Where might he apply for permission to view the exterior, at any rate? He had been given to understand, surlily, that it would do no good: but everything was in the hands of Lord Balgrummo's Trust. The Trust's solicitor and chairman was a Mr. T. M. Gillespie, of Reid, Gillespie, and MacIlwraith, Hanover Street.

Thus Balgrummo Lodging had been added to Rafe Horgan's list of divers projects. A few days later, he had scraped acquaintance with Gillespie, a dehydrated bachelor. Initially, he had not mentioned Balgrummo Lodging, but had talked in Gillespie's chambers about a hypothetical Miss Horgan in Glasgow, allegedly an aunt of his, a spinster of large means, who was thinking of a family trust. Mr. Gillespie, he had heard it said, was experienced in the devising and management of such trusts. As venture-capital, a cheque from Horgan had even been made out to Mr. Gillespie, in payment for general advice upon getting up a conceivable Janet Horgan Estates, Ltd.

Gillespie, he had discovered, was a lonely solicitor who could be cultivated, and who had a dry relish for dry sherry. After a bottle,

Gillespie might talk more freely than a solicitor ought to talk. They came to dine together fairly frequently—after Horgan had learnt, from a chance remark which he affected to receive casually, that some good pictures remained at the Lodging. As the weeks elapsed, they were joined for a meal, once and again, by Gillespie's old friend Dr. Euphemia Inchburn, Lord Balgrummo's niece, a superannuated gynecologist. Horgan had turned on all his charm, and Dr. Inchburn had slipped into garrulity.

Perceiving that he really might be on to a good thing, Horgan had poked into old gazeteers which might mention Balgrummo Lodging; and, as he obtained from his new friends some hint of the iniquities of the tenth Baron Balgrummo, he looked into old newspaper files. He knew a little about pictures, as he did about a number of things; and by consulting the right books and catalogues, he ascertained that on the rotting walls of Balgrummo Lodging there still must hang some highly valuable family portraits—though not family portraits only—none of them exhibited anywhere since 1913. Gillespie was interested only in Scottish portrait-painters, and not passionately in them; Horgan judged it imprudent to question Dr. Effie Inchburn overmuch on the subject, lest his inquisitiveness be fixed in her memory. But he became reasonably well satisfied that Lord Balgrummo, senescent monster, must possess an Opie; a Raeburn; a Ramsay or two; perhaps even three Wilkies; a good Reynolds, possibly, and a Constable; a very good Romney; a Gainsborough, it appeared, and (happy prospect) a Hogarth; two small canvasses by William Etty; a whole row of reputed Knellers; once, and just conceivably still, a Cranach and a Holbein were to be seen at the Lodging. The tenth baron's especial acquisition, about 1911, had been an enormous Fuseli, perhaps unknown to compilers of catalogues, and (judging from one of Dr. Inchburn's grimaces) probably obscene. There were more pictures—the devil knew what.

Perhaps some rare books might be found in the library, but Horgan was too little of a bibliophile to pick them out in a hurry. The silver and that sort of thing presumably were in a bank—it

would have been risky to inquire. Anyone but a glutton would be content with those pictures, for one night's work.

Lethargy, and the consequences of permanent confinement to his house, naturally had made Lord Balgrummo neglect his inheritance. As the decades had slipped by, he had permitted his trustees to sell nearly everything he owned, except Balgrummo Lodging—once a residence of convenience, near Edinburgh, for the Inchburns, later a dower-house—and those pictures. "After all, never going out, Alec has to look at *something*," Dr. Inchburn had murmured.

Sufficient intelligence obtained, still Horgan faced the difficulty of entering the house without the peril and expense of a gang-raid, and of getting out undetected with those pictures. An attempt had been made several years before. On that occasion, Jock Jamieson, the night porter—"warden"—would have been a better style—had shot to death one burglar and wounded another while they were on a ladder. Jamieson and his day mates (one of them the constable-type with whom Horgan had talked at the gate) were hard, vigilant men—and, like Lord Balgrummo's nurses, excellently paid. Time had been when it seemed at least as important to keep Lord Balgrummo in (though he had given his word never to leave the policies) as to keep predators out. Gillespie had implied that the police indulged in the peculiar porters of Balgrummo Lodging a certain readiness in the use of firearms. So Horgan's expedition had been most painstakingly plotted, and it had been necessary to wait months for the coincidence of favorable circumstances, all things being held in readiness.

The presence of a nurse in the house all round the clock was a further vexation; Horgan had not relished the prospect of pursuing a frantic nurse through that crumbling warren of a place. Should she escape through some back door . . . So when, only yesterday, Gillespie had mentioned that the night nurse had quit ("Nerves, as usual, in that house—and his lordship a disagreeable patient"), and that they had not yet found a replacement, Horgan knew his moment had arrived.

For one night, Jamieson had been required to do double duty,

watching the policies and looking in on Lord Balgrummo every hour. Jock Jamieson, for all his toughness, probably liked being inside the place at night no more than did the nurses. So doubtless Jock had rejoiced when a la-di-dah feminine voice (Nan Stennis's, of course) had informed him late that evening that she was calling on behalf of Mr. Gillespie, and that a new night nurse would make her appearance, in an hour or so, in her own car.

It had gone smoothly enough. Jock had opened the gate at Nan's honk, and then it had been up to Horgan, in the shadows. Had Jock been ten years younger, and less given to beer, he might have got his hands on the shotgun before Horgan could have reached him. But though disliking unnecessary roughness, Horgan had coshed men before, and he coshed Jock swiftly and well. No one came down that obscure lane after dark—few, indeed, in daylight. Therefore the investment in drinks and dinners for Gillespie and the Inchburn old maid, and the expenditure of Horgan's hours, now would be compensated for at an hourly rate of return beyond the dreams of avarice. Swinging his handsome dispatch-case, Horgan entered Balgrummo Lodging.

Within the chilly entrance-hall, the first thing Horgan noticed was the pervasive odor of dry rot. With this stench of doom, what wonder they had to pay triple wages to any nurse! Condemned to solitude, neglectful of business, and latterly penurious, Lord Balgrummo had postponed repairs until the cost of restoring the Lodging would have been gigantic. Even could he have found the money without selling some of his pictures, old Balgrummo probably would not have saved the house; he had no heirs of his body, the entail had been broken long before, and his heir-presumptive—Dr. Effie—never would choose to live in this desolation screened by the tumbledown linoleum-works. There remained only the question as to which would first tumble into atoms—Lord Balgrummo or his prison-mansion.

Horgan sent the beam of his big electric torch round the hall. It flashed across the surface of what appeared to be a vast Canaletto—a prospect of Ravenna, perhaps. Was it the real article, or only from

Canaletto's school? Horgan wished he knew whether it were worth the difficulty of taking and concealing, its size considered. Well, he would leave it to the last, securing the certified goods first.

He had known there was no electric light in Balgrummo Lodging; nothing had been improved there—or much repaired—since 1913. He found, however, elaborate bronze gas-brackets. After fumbling, he found also that he did not know how to light them; or perhaps the gas was turned off, here in the hall. No matter: the torch would suffice, even if the black caverns beyond its ray were distressing.

Before he went to work, he must have a glance at old Balgrummo, to be quite sure that the crazy old creature couldn't totter out to do some feeble mischief. (In this house, more than fifty years before, he had done great mischief indeed.) Where would his bedroom be? On the second story, at the front, just above the library, likely enough, judging from the plan of the Lodging, at which Horgan had once managed a hasty glance in Gillespie's chambers. Hanging the torch about his neck, Horgan made his way up the broad oak staircase, at first leaning on the balustrade—but presently touching that rail only gingerly, since here and there, even though he wore gloves, it felt spongy to the touch, and trembled in its rottenness when he put too much weight upon it.

At the first-floor turning of the stairs, Horgan paused. Had anything scraped or shuffled down there below, down in the black well of the ground floor? Of course it couldn't have, unless it were a rat. (Balgrummo kept no dogs: "The brutes don't live long at the Lodging," Gillespie had murmured in an obscure aside.) How had those night nurses endured this situation, at whatever wages? One reason why Balgrummo Lodging hadn't been pillaged before this, Horgan ruminated, was the ghastly reputation of the place, lingering over five decades. Few enterprising lads, even from Fossie housing estate, would be inclined to venture into the auld bogle nobleman's precincts. Well, that ghostly wind had blown him good. No one could be more effectively rational than Rafe Horgan, who wouldn't fret about blood spilt before the First World War. Still, indubitably this was an oppressive house—stagnant, stagnant.

"Haunted?" Dr. Effie had replied hesitantly to Horgan's jocular inquiry. "If you mean haunted by dead ancestors, Major Horgan—why, no more than most old houses here in Scotland, I suppose. Who would be troubled, after so many generations, by old General Sir Angus Inchburn in his Covenanting jackboots? Ghostly phenomena, or so I've read, seldom linger long after a man's or a woman's death and burial. But if you ask whether there's something fey at work in the house—oh, I certainly suppose so."

Having paused to polish her spectacles, Dr. Effie continued calmly enough: "That's Uncle Alec's fault. He's not present merely in one room, you know; he fills the house, every room, every hour. Presumably I seem silly to you, Major Horgan, but my impulses won't let me visit Balgrummo more than I must, even if Alec does mean to leave everything to me. Balgrummo Lodging is like a saturated sponge, dripping with the shame and the longing of Alexander Fillan Inchburn. Can you understand that my uncle loathes what he did, and yet might do it again—even the worst of it—if there were opportunity? The horror of Balgrummo Lodging isn't Lord Balgrummo nine-tenths dead; it's Balgrummo one-tenth alive, but in torment."

The tedious old girl-doctor was nearly as cracked as her noble uncle, Horgan thought. Actually he had learned from some interesting research the general character of Lord Balgrummo's offenses so long ago—acts which would have produced the hanging of anyone but a peer, in those days. Horgan nevertheless had amused himself by endeavoring, slyly and politely, to force Dr. Effie to tell him just why Balgrummo had been given the choice of standing trial for his life (by the Lords, of course, as a peer, which might have damaged the repute of that body) or of being kept in a kind of perpetual house-arrest, without sentence being passed by anyone. The latter choice would not have been offered—and accepted—even so, but for the general belief that he must be a maniac.

As he had anticipated, Dr. Euphemia had turned prude. "Poor Alec was very naughty when he was young. There were others as bad as himself, but he took the whole blame on his shoulders. He was told

that if he would swear never to go out, all his life, and to receive no visitors except members of his family or his solicitors, no formal charges would be pressed against him. They required him to put everything he owned into trust; and the trustees were to engage the men to watch the policies of Balgrummo Lodging, and the servants. All the original set of trustees are dead and buried; Mr. Gillespie and I weren't much more than babies when Uncle Alec had his Trouble."

From Gillespie, later, Rafe Horgan had learned more about that Trouble. But what was he doing, pausing in the darkness of the second-floor corridor to reminisce? A hasty inspection by the torch showed him that the Knellers, all great noses, velvets, and bosoms, were hung on this floor. And there was the Gainsborough, a good one, though it badly needed cleaning: Margaret, Lady Ross, second daughter of the fifth Lord Balgrummo. The worm had got into the picture-frame, but the canvas seemed to be in decent condition, he made out on closer examination. Well, Horgan meant to cut his pictures out of their frames, to save time and space. First, though, he must look in upon Himself.

The corridor was all dust and mildew. A single charwoman, Gillespie had mentioned, came a few hours daily, Monday through Friday, to keep Balgrummo's bedroom and small parlor neat, to clean the stairs and to wash dishes in the kitchen. Otherwise, the many rooms and passages of the Lodging were unceasingly shuttered against sun and moon, and the damask might fall in tatters from the walls, the ceiling drip with cobwebs, for all old Balgrummo cared. Nearly every room was left locked, though the keys, all but a few, were in the bunch (each with its metal tag) that Horgan had taken from unconscious Jock. Even Gillespie, who waited on his client four or five times a year, never had contrived to see the chapel. Balgrummo kept the chapel key in his own pocket, Gillespie fancied—and, over coffee and brandy, had mentioned this, together with other trivia, to Horgan. "It was in the chapel, you see, Rafe, that the worst of the Trouble happened."

Acquiring that chapel key was an additional reason why Horgan must pay his respects to Lord Balgrummo—though he relished that

necessity less, somehow, with every minute that elapsed. Henry Fuseli's most indecorous painting might be in that chapel; for the tenth baron's liturgy and ritual, fifty years before, had been a synthesis of Benin witch-rites with memories of Scots diabolism, and whatever might excite the frantic fancy had been employed—all gross images. So, at least, Horgan had surmised from what he had garnered from the old newspaper files, and what Gillespie had let drop.

Uncertain of quite where he was in the house, Horgan tried the knobs of three doors in that corridor. The first two were locked; and it was improbable that the trustees had gone so far, even when Balgrummo was stronger, as to have him locked into his rooms at night. But the third door opened creakingly. Flashing round his light, Horgan entered an old-fashioned parlor, with what appeared to be two bona-fide Wilkie landscapes on opposite walls. Across the parlor, which was scarcely bigger than a dressing-room, a mahogany door stood half-open. How silent! Yet something scraped or ticked faintly—a morose deathwatch beetle in the panelling, probably. Despite irrational misgivings, Horgan compelled himself to pass through the inner doorway.

The beam of his torch swept to a Queen Anne bed. In it lay, motionless and with eyes shut, an extremely old man, skin and bone under a single sheet and a single blanket. A coal fire smouldered in the grate, so the room was not altogether dark. Horgan's flesh crept perceptibly—but that would be the old rumors, and the old truths, about this enfeebled thing in the bed. "In his prime, we called him Ozymandias," Gillespie had put it. But Lord Balgrummo was past obscenities and atrocities now.

"Hello, Alec!" Horgan was loud and jocular. His right hand rested on the cosh in his coat pocket. "Alec, you old toad, I've come for your pictures." But Alexander Fillan Inchburn, the last of a line that went back to a bastard of William the Lion, did not stir or speak.

T. M. Gillespie was proud of Lord Balgrummo, as the most remarkable person whose business ever had come his way. "Our Scots

Gilles de Rais," Gillespie had chuckled aridly while enjoying a Jamaican cigar from Horgan's case, "probably would not be found insane by a board of medical examiners—not even after fifty years of restriction to his own private Hell. I don't think it was from malice that the procurator-fiscal of that day recommended Balgrummo Lodging—where the capital offenses had been committed—as the place of isolated residence: it merely happened that this particular house of Lord Balgrummo's was secluded enough to keep his lordship out of the public eye (for he might have been stoned), and yet near enough to the city for police surveillance, during the earlier decades. I take it that the police have forgotten his existence, or almost forgotten, by this time: for the past three or four years, he wouldn't have been able to walk unaided so far as the gate-cottage."

It was something of a relief to Horgan, finding that Lord Balgrummo was past giving coherent evidence in a court of law—and therefore need not be given the *quietus*. Even though they no longer hanged anybody for anything, and even though Balgrummo could have been eliminated in thirty seconds by a pillow over his face, the police pursued a homicide much more energetically than they did a picture-fancier.

But was this penny-dreadful monster of fifty years ago, with his white beard now making him sham-venerable in this four-poster, still among the living? Horgan almost could see the bones through his skin; Balgrummo might have come to his end during the hour or so since Jamieson had made his rounds. To be sure, Horgan took a mirror from the dressing-table and held it close to the pallid sunken face. Setting his torch on its base, he inspected the mirror's surface; yes, there was a faint moist film, so the tenth baron still breathed.

Balgrummo must be stone-deaf, or in coma. Dr. Effie had said he had gone almost blind recently. Was it true? Horgan nearly yielded to a loathsome impulse to roll back those withered eyelids, but he reminded himself that somehow he wouldn't be able to endure seeing his own image in this dying man's malign pupils.

The coshing of Jock, the nervous partial exploration of this dismal house, the sight of loathsome old Balgrummo on the edge of dis-

solution—these trials had told on Horgan, old hand though he was at predatory ventures. With all the hours left to him, it would do no harm to sit for a few minutes in this easy chair, almost as if he were Balgrummo's nurse—keeping watch on the bed, surely, to make certain that Balgrummo wasn't (in reason's spite) shamming in some way—and to review in his brain the pictures he ought to secure first, and the rooms in which he was likely to find them.

But it would be heartening to have more light than his torch. Never turning his back on the bed, Horgan contrived to light a gas-bracket near the door; either these gas-fittings were simpler than those belowstairs, or he had got the trick of the operation. The interior shutters of this bedroom being closed, there wasn't the faintest danger of a glimmer of light being perceived by chance passersby—not that anybody conceivably could pass by Balgrummo Lodging on a rainy midnight.

Lord Balgrummo seemed no less grisly in the flood of gaslight. However much exhausted by strain, you couldn't think of going to sleep, for the briefest nap, in a chair only six feet distant from this unspeaking and unspeakable thing in the bed; not when you knew just how "very naughty," in Dr. Euphemia's phrase, Balgrummo had been. The Trouble for which he had paid had been only the culmination of a series of arcane episodes, progressing from hocus-pocus to the ultimate horror.

"No, not lunatic, in any ordinary definition of the term," Gillespie had declared. "Balgrummo recognized the moral character of his acts—aye, more fully than does the average sensual man. Also he was, and is, quite rational, in the sense that he can transact some ordinary business of life when pressed. He fell into a devil of a temper when we proposed to sell some of his pictures to pay for putting the house and the policies in order; he knows his rights, and that the trustees can't dispose of his plenishings against his explicit disapproval. He's civil enough, in his mocking way, to his niece, Effie, when she calls—and to me, when I have to see him. He still reads a good deal—or did, until his sight began to fail—though only books

in his own library; half the ceiling has fallen in the library, but he shuffles through the broken plaster on the shaky floor."

On the right of the bed-head there hung an indubitable Constable; on the left, a probable Etty. The two were fairly small, and Horgan could take them whenever he wished. But his throat was dry, this house being so damned dusty. A decanter stood on the dressing-table, a silver brandy label round its neck, and by it two cut-glass tumblers. "Not a drop for you, Alec?" inquired Horgan, grinning defiantly at the silent man on the bed. He seated himself in the velvet-upholstered armchair again and drank the brandy neat.

"No, one can't say," Gillespie had continued (in that last conversation which now seemed so far away and long ago), "that his lordship is wholly incompetent to take a hand in the management of his affairs. It's rather that he's *distant*—preoccupied, in more senses than one. He has to exert his will to bring his consciousness back from wherever it drifts—and one can see that the effort isn't easy for him."

"He's in a brown study, you mean, Tom?" Horgan had inquired, not much interested at that time.

"It's not the phrase I would choose, Rafe. Dr. Effie talks about the 'astral body' and such rubbish, as if she half believed in it—you've heard her. That silliness was a principal subject of Balgrummo's 'researches' for two years before the Trouble, you understand; his Trouble was the culmination of those experiments. But of course . . ."

"Of course he's only living in the past," Horgan had put in.

"*Living?* Who really knows what that word means?" T. M. Gillespie, W.S., devoted to the memory of David Hume, professed a contempt for rationalism as profound as his contempt for superstition. "And why say *past*? Did you never think that a man might be ossified in time? What you call Balgrummo's past, Rafe, may be Balgrummo's own present, as much as this table-talk of ours is the present for you and me. The Trouble is his lordship's obsessive reality. Attaining to genuine evil requires strict application to the discipline, eh? Balgrummo is not merely remembering the events of

what you and I call 1913, or even 'reliving' those events. No, I suspect it's this: he's embedded in those events, like a beetle in amber. For Balgrummo, one certain night in Balgrummo Lodging continues forever.

"When Dr. Effie and I distract him by raising the trivia of current business, he has to depart from *his* reality, and gropes briefly through a vexatious little dreamworld in which his niece and his solicitor are insubstantial shadows. In Alexander Inchburn's consciousness, I mean, there is no remembrance and no anticipation. He's not 'living in the past,' not engaging in an exercise of retrospection; for him, Time is restricted to one certain night, and space is restricted to one certain house, or perhaps one certain room. Passionate experience has chained him to a fixed point in Time, so to speak. But Time, as so many have said, is a human convention, not an objective reality. Can you prove that your Time is more substantial than his?"

Horgan hadn't quite followed Gillespie, and said so.

"I put it this way, Rafe," Gillespie had gone on, didactically. "What's the time of day in Hell? Why, Hell is timeless—or so my grandfather told me, and he was minister at the Tron. Hell knows no future and no past, but only the everlasting moment of damnation. Also Hell is spaceless; or, conceivably, it's a locked box, damnably confining. Here we have Lord Balgrummo shut up perpetually in his box called Balgrummo Lodging, where the fire is not quenched and the worm never dieth. One bloody and atrocious act, committed in that very box, literally is his enduring *reality*. He's not recollecting; he's experiencing, here and (for him) now. All the frightful excitement of that Trouble, the very act of profanation and terror, lifts him out of what we call Time. Between Dr. Effie and me on the one side, and distant Balgrummo on the other, a great gulf is fixed.

"If you like, you can call that gulf Time. For that gulf, I praise whatever gods there be. For if any man's or woman's consciousness should penetrate to Balgrummo's consciousness, to his time-scheme, to his world beyond the world—or if, through some vortex of mind and soul, anyone were sucked into that narrow place of torment—

then the intruder would end like *this*." Gillespie, tapping his cigar upon an ash-tray, knocked into powder a long projection of grey ash. "Consumed, Rafe."

Scratch the canny Scot, Horgan had thought then, even the pedant of law, and you find the bogle-dreading Pict. "I suppose you mean, really, Tom, that he's out of his head," Horgan had commented, bored with tipsy and unprofitable speculation.

"I mean precisely the contrary, Rafe. I mean that anyone who encounters Lord Balgrummo ought to be on his guard against being drawn into Balgrummo's head. In what you and I designate as 1913 (though, as I said, dates have no significance for Balgrummo), his lordship was a being of immense moral power, magnetic and seductive. I'm not being facetious. Moral power is a catalyst, and can work for good or evil. Even now, I'm acutely uneasy when I sit with Balgrummo, aware that this old man might absorb me. I shouldn't wish to stir those sleeping fires by touching his passions. That's why Balgrummo had to be confined five decades ago—but not simply because he might be *physically* dangerous. Yet I can't explain to you; you've not watched Balgrummo in what you call his 'brown study,' and you never will, happy man." Their conversation then had shifted to Miss Janet Horgan's hypothetical trust.

Yet Gillespie had been a bad prophet. Here he was, clever Rafe Horgan, man of supple talents and slippery fingers, leisurely watching Lord Balgrummo in his brown study—or in his coma, more precisely—and finishing his lordship's decanter of praiseworthy brandy. You had to remember to keep watching that cadaverous face above the sheet, though; if you let your eyes close even for a second, *his* might open, for all you could tell. After all, you were only a guest in Balgrummo's very own little Hell. The host mustn't be permitted to forget his manners.

Now where would the expiring monster keep his privy effects—the key to that chapel on the floor above, for instance? Steady, Rafe, boy: keep your eyes on his face as you open his bedside drawer. Right you are, Rafe, you always were lucky; the nurse had put old Alec's three keys on a chain, along with watch and pocket-comb and such

effects, into this very drawer. One of these keys should let you into the chapel, Rafe. Get on with you; you've drunk all the brandy a reasonable man needs.

"Don't you mean to give me a guided tour, Alec? Stately homes of Scotia, and all that? Won't you show me your chapel, where you and your young chums played your dirty little games, and got your fingers burned? Cheerio, then; don't blame me if you can't be bothered to keep an eye on your goods and chattels."

Back away from him, toward the door, Rafe. Let him lie. How had Dr. Effie put it? "He fills the house, every room, every hour." Cheerless thought, that, fit for a scrawny old maid. The talkative Euphemia must have nearly as many screws loose as had her uncle; probably she envied him his revels.

"I really believe the others led Uncle Alec into the whole business, gradually," Dr. Effie had droned on, the last time he had seen her. "But once in, he took command, as natural to him. He was out in Nigeria before people called it Nigeria, you know, and in Guinea, and all up and down that coast. He began collecting materials for a monograph on African magic—raising the dead, and summoning devils, and more. Presently he was dabbling in the spells, not merely collecting them—so my father told me, forty years ago. After Uncle Alec came home, he didn't stop dabbling. Some very reputable people dabbled when I was a girl. But the ones around Uncle Alec weren't in the least reputable.

"Charlatans? Not quite; I wish they had been. They fed Balgrummo's appetite. Yet he was after knowledge, at least in the beginning; and though he may have boggled, more than once, at the steps he had to descend toward the source of that knowledge, he grew more eager as he pressed down into the dark. Or so father guessed; father became one of Uncle Alec's original trustees, and felt it his duty to collect some evidence of what had happened—though it sickened father, the more he uncovered of his brother's queerness.

"Toward the end, Balgrummo may have forgotten about knowledge and have leaped into passion and power. One didn't *learn* what

one had sought to apprehend; one *became* the mystery, possessing it and possessed by it.

"No, not charlatans—not altogether. They took a fortune out of Uncle Alec, one way or another; and he had to pay even more to keep people quiet in those years. They had told Balgrummo, in effect, that they could raise the Devil—though they didn't put it in quite that crude way. Yet they must have been astounded by their success, when it came at last. Balgrummo had paid before, and he has paid ever since. Those others paid, too—especially the man and the woman who died. They had thought they were raising the Devil *for* Lord Balgrummo. But as it turned out, they raised the Devil *through* Balgrummo and *in* Balgrummo. After that, everything fell to pieces."

But to hell with recollections of Euphemia Inchburn, Rafe. Dry rot, wet rot, woodworm, deathwatch beetle: the Devil take them all, and Balgrummo Lodging besides. One thing the Devil shouldn't have—these pictures. Get on to the chapel, Rafe, and then give Nan the glad news. Thanks for the brandy, Alec: I mightn't have got through the business without it.

Yet one dram too many, possibly? Horgan was aware of a certain giddiness, but not fully aware of how he had got up those Stygian stairs, or of what he had done with his torch. Had he turned the key in the lock of the chapel door? He couldn't recall having done so. Still, here he was in the chapel.

No need for the torch; the room, a long gallery, was lit by all those candle-flames in the many-branched candlesticks. Who kept Lord Balgrummo's candles alight? The stench of decay was even stronger here than it had been down below. Underfoot, the floorboards were almost oozing, and mushroom rot squashed beneath his shoes. Some of the panelling had fallen away altogether. High up in the shifting shadows, the moulded-plaster ceiling sagged and bulged as if the lightest touch would bring it all down in slimy little particles.

Back of the altar—the altar of the catastrophic act of Bal-

grummo's Trouble—hung the unknown Fuseli. It was no painting, but an immense cartoon, and the most uninhibited museum-director never would dare show it to the most broad-minded critics of art. Those naked and contorted forms, the instruments of torment fixed upon their flesh, were the inversion of the Agony. Even Horgan could not bear to look at them long.

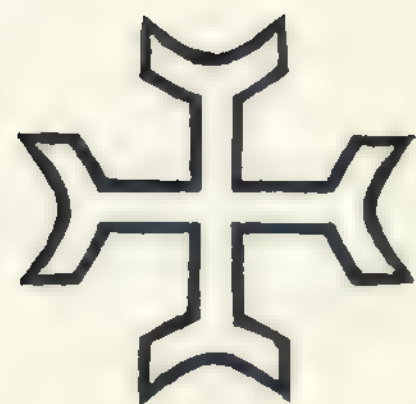
Look at them? All those candles were guttering. Two winked out simultaneously; others failed. As the little flames sank toward extinction, Rafe Horgan became aware that he was not alone.

It was as if the presences skulked in corners or behind the broken furniture. And there could be no retreat toward the door; for something approached from that end of the gallery. As if Horgan's extremity of terror fed it, the shape took on increasing clarity of outline, substance, strength.

Tall, arrogant, implacable, mindless, it drifted toward him. The face was Balgrummo's, or what Balgrummo's must have been fifty years before, but possessed: eager, eager, eager; all appetite, passion, yearning after the abyss. In one hand glittered a long knife.

Horgan bleated and ran. He fell against the cobwebby altar. And in the final act of destruction, something strode across the great gulf of Time.

THERE'S A LONG,
LONG TRAIL A-WINDING



Then he said unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offenses will come; but woe unto him, through whom they come!

It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

LUKE 17:1-2

ALONG THE VAST empty six-lane highway, the blizzard swept as if it meant to swallow all the sensual world. Frank Sarsfield, massive though he was, scudded like a heavy kite before that overwhelming wind. On his thick white hair the snow clotted and tried to form a Phrygian cap; the big flakes so swirled about his Viking face that he scarcely could make out the barren country on either side of the road.

Somehow he must get indoors. Racing for sanctuary, the last automobile had swept unheeding past his thumb two hours ago, doubtless bound for the county town some twenty miles eastward. Westward among the hills, the highway must be blocked by snow-drifts now. This was an unkind twelfth of January. "Blow, blow, thou winter wind!" Twilight being almost upon him, soon he must find lodging or else freeze stiff by the roadside.

He had walked more than thirty miles that day. Having in his pocket the sum of twenty-nine dollars and thirty cents, he could have put up at either of the two motels he had passed, had they not been closed for the winter. Well, as always, he was decently dressed—a good wash-and-wear suit and a neat black overcoat. As always, he

was shaven and clean and civil-spoken. Surely some farmer or villager would take him in, if he knocked with a ten-dollar bill in his fist. People sometimes mistook him for a stranded well-to-do motorist, and sometimes he took the trouble to undeceive them.

But where to apply? This was depopulated country, its forests gone to the sawmills long before, its mines worked out. The freeway ran through the abomination of desolation. He did not prefer to walk the freeways, but on such a day as this there were no cars on the lesser roads.

He had run away from a hardscrabble New Hampshire farm when he was fourteen, and ever since then, except for brief working intervals, he had been either on the roads or in the jails. Now his sixtieth birthday was imminent. There were few men bigger than Frank Sarsfield, and none more solitary. Where was a friendly house?

For a few moments, the rage of the snow slackened; he stared about. Away to the left, almost a mile distant, he made out a grim high clump of buildings on rising ground, a wall enclosing them; the roof of the central building was gone. Sarsfield grinned, knowing what that complex must be: a derelict prison. He had lodged in prisons altogether too many nights.

His hand sheltering his eyes from the north wind, he looked to his right. Down in a snug valley, beside a narrow river and broad marshes, he could perceive a village or hamlet: a white church-tower, three or four commercial buildings, some little houses, beyond them a park of bare maple trees. The old highway must have run through or near this forgotten place, but the new freeway had sealed it off. There was no sign of a freeway exit to the settlement; probably it could be reached by car only along some detouring country lane. In such a little decayed town there would be folk willing to accept him for the sake of his proffered ten dollars—or, better, simply for charity's sake and talk with an amusing stranger who could recite every kind of poetry.

He scrambled heavily down the embankment. At this point, praise be, no tremendous wire fence kept the haughty new highway inviolable. His powerful thighs took him through the swelling drifts, though his heart pounded as the storm burst upon him afresh.

The village was more distant than he had thought. He passed panting through old fields half-grown up to poplar and birch. A little to the west he noticed what seemed to be old mine-workings, with fragments of brick buildings. He clambered upon an old railroad bed, its rails and ties taken up; perhaps the new freeway had dealt the final blow to the rails. Here the going was somewhat easier.

Mingled with the wind's shriek, did he hear a church-bell now? Could they be holding services at the village in this weather? Presently he came to a burnt-out little railway depot, on its platform signboard still the name "Anthonyville." Now he walked on a street of sorts, but no car-tracks or footprints sullied the snow.

Anthonyville Free Methodist Church hulked before him. Indeed the bell was swinging, and now and again faintly ringing in the steeple; but it was the wind's mockery, a knell for the derelict town of Anthonyville. The church door was slamming in the high wind, flying open again, and slamming once more, like a perpetual-motion machine, the glass being gone from the church windows. Sarsfield trudged past the skeletal church.

The front of Emmons's General Store was boarded up, and so was the front of what may have been a drugstore. The village hall was a wreck. The school may have stood upon those scanty foundations which protruded from the snow. And from no chimney of the decrepit cottages and cabins along Main Street—the only street—did any smoke rise.

Sarsfield never had seen a deader village. In an upper window of what looked like a livery-stable converted into a garage, a faded cardboard sign could be read—

REMEMBER YOUR FUTURE BACK THE TOWNSEND PLAN

Was no one at all left here—not even some gaunt old couple managing on Social Security? He might force his way into one of the stores or cottages—though on principle and prudence he generally steered clear of possible charges of breaking and entering—but that would be cold comfort. In poor Anthonyville there must remain some living soul.

His mittened hands clutching his red ears, Sarsfield had plodded nearly to the end of Main Street. Anthonyville was Endsville, he saw now: river and swamp and new highway cut it off altogether from the rest of the frozen world, except for the drift-obliterated country road that twisted southward, Lord knew whither. He might count himself lucky to find a stove, left behind in some shack, that he could feed with boards ripped from walls.

Main Street ended at that grove or park of old maples. Just a sugarbush, like those he had tapped in his boyhood under his father's rough command? No: had the trees not been leafless, he might not have discerned the big stone house among the trees, the only substantial building remaining to Anthonyville. But see it he did for one moment, before the blizzard veiled it from him. There were stone gateposts, too, and a bronze tablet set into one of them. Sarsfield brushed the snowflakes from the inscription: "Tamarack House."

Stumbling among the maples toward this promise, he almost collided with a tall glacial boulder. A similar boulder rose a few feet to his right, the pair of them halfway between gateposts and house. There was a bronze tablet on this boulder, too, and he paused to read it:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF

JEROME ANTHONY

JULY 4, 1836—JANUARY 14, 1915

BRIGADIER-GENERAL IN THE CORPS OF ENGINEERS,
ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC, FOUNDER OF THIS TOWN
ARCHITECT OF ANTHONYVILLE STATE PRISON
WHO DIED AS HE HAD LIVED, WITH HONOR

*"And there will I keep you forever,
Yes, forever and a day,
Till the walls shall crumble in ruin,
And moulder in dust away."*

There's an epitaph for a prison architect, Sarsfield thought. It was too bitter an evening for inspecting the other boulder, and he

hurried toward the portico of Tamarack House. This was a very big house indeed, a bracketed house, built all of squared fieldstone with beautiful glints to the masonry. A cupola topped it.

Once, come out of the cold into a public library, Sarsfield had pored through a picture-book about American architectural styles. There was a word for this sort of house. Was it "Italianate"? Yes, it rose in his memory—he took pride in no quality except his power of recollection. Yes, that was the word. Had he visited this house before? He could not account for a vague familiarity. Perhaps there had been a photograph of this particular house in that library book.

Every window was heavily shuttered, and no smoke rose from any of the several chimneys. Sarsfield went up to the stone steps to confront the oaken front door.

It was a formidable door, but it seemed as if at some time it had been broken open, for long ago a square of oak with a different grain had been mortised into the area round lock and keyhole. There was a gigantic knocker with a strange face worked upon it. Sarsfield knocked repeatedly.

No one answered. Conceivably the storm might have made his pounding inaudible to any occupants, but who could spend the winter in a shuttered house without fires? Another bronze plaque was screwed to the door:

TAMARACK HOUSE
PROPERTY OF THE ANTHONY FAMILY TRUST
GUARDED BY PROTECTIVE SERVICE

Sarsfield doubted the veracity of the last line. He made his way round to the back. No one answered those back doors, either, and they too were locked.

But presently he found what he had hoped for: an oldfangled slanting cellar door, set into the foundations. It was not wise to enter without permission, but at least he might accomplish it without breaking. His fingers, though clumsy, were strong as the rest of him. After much trouble and with help from the Boy Scout knife that he carried, he pulled the pins out of the cellar door's three hinges and

scrambled down into the darkness. With the passing of the years, he had become something of a jailhouse lawyer—though those young inmates bored him with their endless chatter about Miranda and Escobedo. And now he thought of the doctrine called “defense of necessity.” If caught, he could say that self-preservation from freezing is the first necessity; besides, they might not take him for a bum.

Faint light down the cellar steps—he would replace the hinge-pins later—showed him an inner door at the foot. That door was hooked, though hooked only. With a sigh, Sarsfield put his shoulder to the door; the hook clattered to the stone floor inside; and he was master of all he surveyed.

In that black cellar he found no light-switch. Though he never smoked, he carried matches for such emergencies. Having lit one, he discovered a providential kerosene lamp on a table, with enough kerosene still in it. Sarsfield went lamp-lit through the cellars and up more stone stairs into a pantry. “Anybody home?” he called. It was an eerie echo.

He would make sure before exploring, for he dreaded shotguns. How about a cheerful song? In that chill pantry, Sarsfield bellowed a tune formerly beloved at Rotary Clubs. Once a waggish Rotarian, after half an hour’s talk with the hobo extraordinary, had taken him to Rotary for lunch and commanded him to tell tales of the road and to sing the members a song. Frank Sarsfield’s untutored voice was loud enough when he wanted it to be, and he sang the song he had sung to Rotary:

*“There’s a long, long trail a-winding into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingale is singing and the white moon beams;
There’s a long, long night of waiting until my dreams all come true,
Till the day when I’ll be walking down that long, long trail to you!”*

No response: no cry, no footstep, not a rustle. Even in so big a house, they couldn’t have failed to hear his song, sung in a voice fit to wake the dead. Father O’Malley had called Frank’s voice “stentorian”

—a good word, though he was not just sure what it meant. He liked that last line, though he'd no one to walk to; he'd repeat it:

"Till the day when I'll be walking down that long, long trail to you!"

It was all right. Sarsfield went into the dining room, where he found a splendid long walnut table, chairs with embroidered seats, a fine sideboard and china cabinet, and a high Venetian chandelier. The china was in that cabinet, and the silverware was in that sideboard. But in no room of Tamarack House was any living soul.

Sprawled in a big chair before the fireplace in the Sunday parlor, Sarsfield took the chill out of his bones. The woodshed, connected with the main house by a passage from the kitchen, was half filled with logs—not first-rate fuel, true, for they had been stacked there three or four years ago, to judge by the fungi upon them, but burnable after he had collected old newspapers and chopped kindling. He had crisscrossed elm and birch to make a noble fire.

It was not very risky to let white woodsmoke eddy from the chimneys, for it would blend with the driving snow and the blast would dissipate it at once. Besides, Anthonyville's population was zero. From the cupola atop the house, in another lull of the blizzard, he had looked over the icy countryside and had seen no inhabited farmhouse up the forgotten dirt road—which, anyway, was hopelessly blocked by drifts today. There was no approach for vehicles from the freeway, while river and marsh protected the rear. He speculated that Tamarack House might be inhabited summers, though not in any very recent summer. The "Protective Service" probably consisted of a farmer who made a fortnightly inspection in fair weather.

It was good to hole up in a remote county where burglars seemed unknown as yet. Frank Sarsfield restricted his own depredations to church poor-boxes (Catholic, preferably, he being no Protestant) and then under defense of necessity, after a run of unsuccessful mendicancy. He feared and detested strong thieves, so numerous nowadays; to avoid them and worse than thieves, he steered clear of

the cities, roving to little places which still kept crime in the family, where it belonged.

He had dined, and then washed the dishes dutifully. The kitchen wood-range still functioned, and so did the hard-water and soft-water hand pumps in the scullery. As for food, there was enough to feed a good-sized prison: the shelves of the deep cellar cold-room threatened to collapse under the weight of glass jars full of jams, jellies, preserved peaches, apricots, applesauce, pickled pork, pickled trout, and many more good things, all redolent of his New England youth. Most of the jars had neat paper labels, all giving the year of canning, some the name of the canner; on the front shelves, the most recent date he had found was 1968, on a little pot of strawberry jam, and below it was the name "Allegra" in a feminine hand.

Everything in this house lay in apple-pie order—though Sarsfield wondered how long the plaster would keep from cracking, with Tamarack House unheated in winter. He felt positively virtuous for lighting fires, one here in the Sunday parlor, another in the little antique iron stove in the bedroom he had chosen for himself at the top of the house.

He had poked into every handsome room of Tamarack House, with the intense pleasure of a small boy who had found his way into an enchanted castle. Every room was satisfying, well-furnished (he was warming by the fire two sheets from the linen closet, for his bed), and wondrously old-fashioned. There was no electric light, no central heating, no bathroom; there was an indoor privy, at the back of the woodshed, but no running water unless one counted the hand pumps. There was an oldfangled wall telephone: Frank tried, greatly daring, for the operator, but it was dead. He had found a crystal-set radio that didn't work. This was an old lady's house, surely, and the old lady hadn't visited it for some years, but perhaps her relatives kept it in order as a "holiday home" or in hope of selling it—at ruined Anthonyville, a forlorn hope. He had discovered two canisters of tea, a jar full of coffee beans, and ten gallons of kerosene. How thoughtful!

Perhaps the old lady was dead, buried under the other boulder

among the maples in front of the house. Perhaps she had been the General's daughter—but no, not if the General had been born in 1836. Why those graves in the lawn? Sarsfield had heard of farm families, near medical schools in the old days, who had buried their dead by the house for fear of body-snatchers; but that couldn't apply at Anthonyville. Well, there were family graveyards, but this must be one of the smallest.

The old General who built this house had died on January fourteenth. Day after tomorrow, January fourteenth would come round again, and it would be Frank Sarsfield's sixtieth birthday. "I drink your health in water, General," Sarsfield said aloud, raising his cut-glass goblet taken from the china cabinet. There was no strong drink in the house, but that didn't distress Sarsfield, for he never touched it. His mother had warned him against it—and sure enough, the one time he had drunk a good deal of wine, when he was new to the road, he had got sick. "Thanks, General, for your hospitality." Nobody responded to his toast.

His mother had been a saint, the neighbors had said, and his father a drunken devil. He had seen neither of them after he ran away. He had missed his mother's funeral because he hadn't known of her death until months after; he had missed his father's, long later, because he chose to miss it, though that omission cost him sleepless nights now. Sarsfield slept poorly at best. Almost always there were nightmares.

Yet perhaps he would sleep well enough tonight in that little garret room near the cupola. He had found that several of the bedrooms in Tamarack House had little metal plates over their doorways. There were "The General's Room" and "Father's Room" and "Mama's Room" and "Alice's Room" and "Allegra's Room" and "Edith's Room." By a happy coincidence, the little room at the top of the back stair, on the garret floor of the house, was labelled "Frank's Room." But he'd not chosen it for that only. At the top of the house, one was safer from sheriffs or burglars. And through the skylight—there was only a frieze window—a man could get to the roof of the main block. From that roof, one could descend to the woodshed roof

by a fire-escape of iron rungs fixed in the stone outer wall; and from the woodshed, it was an easy drop to the ground. After that, the chief difficulty would be to run down Main Street and then get across the freeway without being detected, while people searched the house for you. Talk of Goldilocks and the Three Bears! Much experience had taught Sarsfield such forethought.

Had that other Frank, so commemorated over the bedroom door, been a son or a servant? Presumably a son—though Sarsfield had found no pictures of boys in the old velvet-covered album in the Sunday parlor, nor any of manservants. There were many pictures of the General, a little roosterlike man with a beard; and of Father, portly and pleasant-faced; and of Mama, elegant; and of three small girls, who must be Alice and Allegra and Edith. He had liked especially the photographs of Allegra, since he had tasted her strawberry jam. All the girls were pretty, but Allegra—who must be about seven in most of the pictures—was really charming, with long ringlets and kind eyes and a delicate mouth that curved upward at its corners.

Sarsfield adored little girls and distrusted big girls. His mother had cautioned him against bad women, so he had kept away from such. Because he liked peace, he never had married—not that he could have married anyway, because that would have tied him to one place, and he was too clumsy to earn money at practically anything except dish-washing for summer hotels. Not marrying had meant that he could have no little daughters like Allegra.

Sometimes he had puzzled the prison psychiatrists. In prison it was well to play stupid. He had refrained cunningly from reciting poetry to the psychiatrists. So after testing him they wrote him down as "dull normal" and he was assigned to labor as "gardener"—which meant going round the prison yards picking up trash by a stick with a nail in the end of it. That was easy work, and he detested hard work. Yet when there was truly heavy work to be done in prison, sometimes he would come forward to shovel tons of coal or carry hods of brick or lift big blocks into place. That, too, was his cunning: it impressed the other jailbirds with his enormous strength, so that the gangs left him alone.

"Yes, you're a loner, Frank Sarsfield," he said to himself, aloud. He looked at himself in that splendid Sunday-parlor mirror, which stretched from floor to ceiling. He saw a man overweight but lean enough of face, standing six feet six, built like a bear, a strong nose, some teeth missing, a strong chin, and rather wild light-blue eyes. He was an uncommon sort of bum. Deliberately he looked at his image out of the corners of his eyes—as was his way, because he was non-violent, and eye-contact might mean trouble.

"You look like a Viking, Frank," old Father O'Malley had told him once, "but you ought to have been a monk."

"Oh, Father," he had answered, "I'm too much of a fool for a monk."

"Well," said Father O'Malley, "you're no more fool than many a brother, and you're celibate, and continent, I take it. Yet it's late for that now. Look out you don't turn berserker, Frank. Go to confession, sometime, to a priest that doesn't know you, if you'll not go to me. If you'd confess, you'd not be haunted."

But he seldom went to mass, and never to confession. All those church boxes pilfered, his mother and father abandoned, his sister neglected, all the ghastly humbling of himself before policemen, all the horror and shame of the prisons! There could be no grace for him now. "*There's a long, long trail a-winding into the land of my dreams. . . .*" What dreams! He had looked up "berserker" in Webster. But he wouldn't ever do that sort of thing: a man had to keep a control upon himself, and besides he was a coward, and he loved peace.

Nearly all the other prisoners had been brutes, guilty as sin, guilty as Miranda or Escobedo. Once, sentenced for rifling a church safe, he had been put into the same cell with a man who had murdered his wife by taking off her head. The head never had been found. Sarsfield had dreamed of that head in such short intervals of sleep as he had enjoyed while the wife-killer was his cellmate. Nearly all night, every night, he had lain awake surreptitiously watching the murderer in the opposite bunk, and feeling his own neck now and again. He had been surprised and pleased when eventually the wife-killer had

gone hysterical and obtained assignment to another cell. The murderer had told the guards that he just couldn't stand being watched all night by that terrible giant who never talked.

Only one of the prison psychiatrists had been pleasant or bright, and that had been the old doctor born in Vienna who went round from penitentiary to penitentiary checking on the psychiatric staffs. The old doctor had taken a liking to him, and had written a report to accompany Frank's petition for parole. Three months later, in a parole office, the parole officer had gone out hurriedly for a quarter of an hour, and Sarsfield had taken the chance to read his own file that the parole man had left in a folder on his desk.

"Francis Sarsfield has a memory that almost can be described as photographic"—so had run one line in the Vienna doctor's report. When he read that, Sarsfield had known that the doctor was a clever doctor. "He suffers chiefly from an arrest of emotional development, and may be regarded as a rather bright small boy in some respects. His three temporarily successful escapes from prison suggest that his intelligence has been much underrated. On at least one of those three occasions, he could have eluded the arresting officer had he been willing to resort to violence. Sarsfield repeatedly describes himself as nonviolent and has no record of aggression while confined, nor in connection with any of the offenses for which he was arrested. On the contrary, he seems timid and withdrawn, and might become a victim of assaults in prison, were it not for his size, strength, and power of voice."

Sarsfield had been pleased enough by that paragraph, but a little puzzled by what followed:

"In general, Sarsfield is one of those recidivists who ought not to be confined, were any alternative method now available for restraining them from petty offenses against property. Not only does he lack belligerence against men, but apparently he is quite clean of any record against women and children. It seems that he does not indulge in autoeroticism, either—perhaps because of strict instruction by his R.C. mother during his formative years.

"I add, however, that conceivably Sarsfield is not fundamentally so

gentle as his record indicates. He can be energetic in self-defense when pushed to the wall. In his youth occasionally he was induced, for the promise of five dollars or ten dollars, to stand up as an amateur against some travelling professional boxer. He admits that he did not fight hard, and cried when he was badly beaten. Nevertheless, I am inclined to suspect a potentiality for violence, long repressed but not totally extinguished by years of 'humbling himself,' in his phrase. This possibility is not so certain as to warrant additional detention, even though three years of Sarsfield's sentence remain unexpired."

Yes, he had memorized nearly the whole of that old doctor's analysis, which had got his parole for him. There had been the concluding paragraphs:

"Francis Sarsfield is oppressed by a haunting sense of personal guilt. He is religious to the point of superstition, an R.C., and appears to believe himself damned. Although worldly-wise in a number of respects, he retains an almost unique innocence in others. His frequent humor and candor account for his success, much of the time, at begging. He has read much during his wanderings and terms of confinement. He has a strong taste for good poetry of the popular sort, and has accumulated a mass of miscellaneous information, much of it irrelevant to the life he leads.

"Although occasionally moody and even surly, most of the time he subjects himself to authority, and will work fairly well if closely supervised. He possesses no skills of any sort, unless some knack for woodchopping, acquired while he was enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps, can be considered a marketable skill. He appears to be incorrigibly footloose, and therefore confinement is more unpleasant to him than to most prisoners. It is truly remarkable that he continues to be rational enough, his isolation and heavy guilt-complex considered.

"Sometimes evasive when he does not desire to answer questions, nevertheless he rarely utters a direct lie. His personal modesty may be described as excessive. His habits of cleanliness are commendable, if perhaps of origins like Lady Macbeth's.

"Despite his strength, he is a diabetic and suffers from a heart murmur, sometimes painful.

"Only in circumstances so favorable as to be virtually unobtainable could Sarsfield succeed in abstaining from the behavior-pattern that has led to his repeated prosecution and imprisonment. The excessive crowding of this penitentiary considered, however, I strongly recommend that he be released upon parole. Previous psychiatric reports concerning this inmate have been shallow and erroneous, I regret to note. Perhaps Sarsfield's chief psychological difficulty is that, from obscure causes, he lacks emotional communication with other adults, although able to maintain cordial and healthy relations with small children. He is very nearly a solipsist, which in large part may account for his inability to make firm decisions or pursue any regular occupation. In contradiction of previous analyses of Sarsfield, he should not be described as 'dull normal' intellectually. Francis Xavier Sarsfield distinctly is neither dull nor normal."

Sarsfield had looked up "solipsist," but hadn't found himself much the wiser. He didn't think himself the only existent thing—not most of the time, anyway. He wasn't sure that the old doctor had been real, but he knew that his mother had been real before she went straight to Heaven. He knew that his nightmares probably weren't real; but sometimes, while awake, he could see things that other men couldn't. In a house like this, he could glimpse little unaccountable movements out of the corners of his eyes, but it wouldn't do to worry about those. He was afraid of those things which other people couldn't see, yet not so frightened of them as most people were. Some of the other inmates had called him Crazy Frank, and it had been hard to keep down his temper. If you could perceive *more* existent things, though not flesh-and-blood things, than psychiatrists or convicts could—why, were you a solipsist?

There was no point in puzzling over it. Dad had taken him out of school to work on the farm when he hadn't yet finished the fourth grade, so words like "solipsist" didn't mean much to him. Poets' words, though, he mostly understood. He had picked up a rhyme that made children laugh when he told it to them:

*"Though you don't know it,
You're a poet.
Your feet show it:
They're Longfellow's."*

That wasn't very good poetry, but Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a good poet. They must have loved Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in this house, and especially "The Children's Hour," because of those three little girls named Alice, Allegra, and Edith, and those lines on the General's boulder. Allegra: that's the prettiest of all names ever, and it means "merry," someone had told him.

He looked at the cheap wristwatch he had bought, besides the wash-and-wear suit, with his last dishwashing money from that Lake Superior summer hotel. Well, midnight! It's up the wooden hill for you, Frank Sarsfield, to your snug little room under the rafters. If anybody comes to Tamarack House tonight, it's out the skylight and through the snow for you, Frank, my boy—and no tiny reindeer. If you want to survive, in prison or out of it, you stick to your own business and let other folks stew in their own juice.

Before he closed his eyes, he would pray for Mother's soul—not that she really needed it—and then say the little Scottish prayer he had found in a children's book:

"From ghosties and ghoulies, long-leggitie beasties, and things that go bump in the night, good Lord deliver us!"

The next morning, the morning before his birthday, Frank Sarsfield went up the circular stair to the cupola, even before making his breakfast of pickled trout and peaches and strong coffee. The wind had gone down, and it was snowing only lightly now, but the drifts were immense. Nobody would make his way to Anthonyville and Tamarack House this day; the snowplows would be busy elsewhere.

From this height he could see the freeway, and nothing seemed to be moving along it. The dead village lay to the north of him. To the east were river and swamp, the shores lined with those handsome tamaracks, the green gone out of them, which had given this house

its name. Everything in sight belonged to Frank.

He had dreamed during the night, the wind howling and whining round the top of the house, and he had known he was dreaming, but it had been even stranger than usual, if less horrible.

In his dream, he had found himself in the dining room of Tamarack House. He had not been alone. The General and Father and Mama and the three little girls had been dining happily at the long table, and he had waited on them. In the kitchen an old woman who was the cook, and a girl who cleaned, had eaten by themselves. But when he had finished filling the family's plates, he had sat down at the end of the table, as if he had been expected to do that.

The family had talked among themselves and even to him as he ate, but somehow he had not been able to hear what they said to him. Suddenly he had pricked up his ears, though, because Allegra had spoken to him.

"Frank," she had said, all mischief, "why do they call you Punkin-head?"

The old General had frowned at the head of the table, and Mama had said, "Allegra, don't speak that way to Frank!"

But he had grinned at Allegra, if slightly hurt, and had told the little girl, "Because some men think I've got a head like a jack-o'-lantern's and not even seeds inside it."

"Nonsense, Frank," Mama had put in, "you have a very handsome head."

"You've got a pretty head, Frank," the three little girls had told him then, almost in chorus, placatingly. Allegra had come round the table to make her peace. "There's going to be a big surprise for you tomorrow, Frank," she had whispered to him. And then she had kissed him on the cheek.

That had waked him. Most of the rest of that howling night he had lain awake trying to make sense of his dream, but he couldn't. The people in it had been more real than the people he met on the long, long trail.

Now he strolled through the house again, admiring everything. It was almost as if he had seen the furniture and the pictures and the carpets long, long ago. The house must be over a century old, and

many of the good things in it must go back to the beginning. He would have two or three more days here until the roads were cleared. There were no newspapers to tell him about the great storm, of course, and no radio that worked; but that didn't matter.

He found a great big handsome *Complete Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, in red morocco, and an illustrated copy of the *Rubaiyat*. He didn't need to read it, because he had memorized all the quatrains once. There was a black silk ribbon as marker between the pages, and he opened it there—at Quatrain 44, it turned out:

*“Why, if the Soul can fling the Dust aside,
And naked on the Air of Heaven ride,
Were't not a Shame—were't not a Shame for him
In this clay carcass crippled to abide?”*

That old Vienna doctor, Frank suspected, hadn't believed in immortal souls. Frank Sarsfield knew better. But also Frank suspected that his soul never would ride, naked or clothed, on the Air of Heaven. Souls! That put him in mind of his sister, a living soul that he had forsaken. He ought to write her a letter on this the eve of his sixtieth birthday.

Frank travelled light, his luggage being mostly a safety razor, a hairbrush, and a comb; he washed his shirt and socks and underclothes every night, and often his wash-and-wear suit, too. But he did carry with him a few sheets of paper and a ballpoint pen. Sitting down at the library table—he had built a fire in the library stove also, there being no lack of logs—he began to write to Mary Sarsfield, alone in the rotting farmhouse in New Hampshire. His spelling wasn't good, he knew, but today he was careful at his birthday letter, using the big old dictionary with the General's bookplate in it.

To write that letter took most of the day. Two versions were discarded. At last Frank had done the best he could.

“Dearest Mary my sister,

“Its been nearly 9 years since I came to visit you and borrowed the \$78 from you and went away again and never paid it back. I guess you dont want to see your brother Frank again after what

I did that time and other times but the Ethiopian can not change his skin nor the leopard his spots and when some man like a Jehovahs Witness or that rancher with all the cash gives me quite a lot of money I mean to send you what I owe but the post office isnt handy at the time and so I spend it on presents for little kids I meet and buying new clothes and such so I never get around to sending you that \$78 Mary. Right now I have \$29 and more but the post office at this place is folded up and by the time I get to the next town the money will be mostly gone and so it goes. I guess probably you need the money and Im sorry Mary but maybe some day I will win in the lottery and then Ill give you all the thousands of dollars I win.

“Well Mary its been 41 years and 183 days since Mother passed away and here I am 60 years old tomorrow and you getting on toward 56. I pray that your cough is better and that your son and my nephew Jack is doing better than he was in Tallahassee Florida. Some time Mary if you would write to me c/o Father Justin O’Malley in Albatross Michigan where he is pastor now I would stop by his rectory and get your letter and read it with joy. But I know Ive been a very bad brother and I dont blame you Mary if you never get around to writing your brother Frank.

“Mary Ive been staying out of jails and working a little here and there along the road. Now Mary do you know what I hate most about those prisons? Why not being on the road you will say. No Mary the worst thing is the foul language the convicts use from morning till night. Taking the name of their Lord in vain is the least they do. There is a foul curse word in every sentence. I wasnt brought up that way any more than you Mary and I will not revile woman or child. It is like being in H—— to hear it.

“Im not in bad shape except the diabetes is no better but I take my pills for it when I can buy them and dont have to take needles for it and my heart hurts me dreadfully bad sometimes when I lift heavy things hours on end and sometimes it hurts me

worse at night when Ive been just lying there thinking of the life Ive led and how I ought to pay you the \$78 and pay back other folks that helped me too. I owe Father O'Malley \$497.11 now altogether and I keep track of it in my head and when the lottery ticket wins he will not be forgot.

"Some people have been quite good to me and I still can make them laugh and I recite to them and generally I start my reciting with what No Person of Quality wrote hundreds of years ago

Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead
Through which the living Homer begged his bread.

They like that and also usually they like Thomas Grays Elegy in a Country Churchyard leaving the world to darkness and to me and I recite all of that and sometimes some of the Quatrains of Omar. At farms when they ask me I chop wood for these folks and I help with the dishes but I still break a good many as you learned Mary 9 years ago but I didnt mean to do it Mary because I am just clumsy in all ways. Oh yes I am good at reciting Frosts Stopping by Woods and his poem about the Hired Man. I have been reading the poetical works of Thomas Stearns Eliot so I can recite his The Hollow Men or much of it and also his Book of Practical Cats which is comical when I come to college towns and some professor or his wife gives me a sandwich and maybe \$2 and maybe a ride to the next town.

"Where I am now Mary I ought to study the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier because theres been a real blizzard maybe the biggest in the state for many years and Im Snowbound. Years ago I tried to memorize all that poem but I got only part way for it is a whopper of a poem.

"I dont hear much good Music Mary because of course at the motels there isnt any phonograph or tape recorder. Id like to hear some good string quartet or maybe old folk songs well sung for music hath charms to soothe the savage breast. Theres an old Edison at the house where Im staying now and what do you

know they have a record of a song you and I used to sing together Theres a Long Long Trail A Winding. Its about the newest record in this house. Ill play it again soon thinking of you Mary my sister. O there is a long long night of waiting.

"Mary right now Im at a big fine house where the people have gone away for awhile and I watch the house for them and keep some of the rooms warm. Let me assure you Mary I wont take anything from this good old house when I go. These are nice people I know and I just came in out of the storm and Im very fond of their 3 sweet little girls. I remember what you looked like when I ran way first and you looked like one of them called Alice. The one I like best though is Allegra because she makes mischief and laughs a lot but is innocent.

"I came here just yesterday but it seems as if Id lived in this house before but of course I couldnt have and I feel at home here. Nothing in this house could scare me much. You might not like it Mary because of little noises and glimpses you get but its a lovely house and as you know I like old places that have been lived in lots.

"By the way Mary once upon a time Father O'Malley told me that to the Lord all time is eternally present. I think this means everything that happens in the world in any day goes on all at once. So God sees what went on in this house long ago and whats going on in this house today all at the same time. Its just as well we dont see through Gods eyes because then wed know everything thats going to happen to us and because Im such a sinner I dont want to know. Father O'Malley says that God may forgive me everything and have something special in store for me but I dont think so because why should He?

"And Father O'Malley says that maybe some people work out their Purgatory here on earth and I might be one of these. He says we are spirits in the prisonhouse of the body which is like we were serving Time in the world here below and maybe God forgave me long ago and Im just waiting my time and paying for

what I did and it will be alright in the end. Or maybe Im being given some second chance to set things right but as Father O'Malley put it to do that Id have to fortify my Will and do some Signal Act of contrition. Father O'Malley even says I might not have to do the Act actually if only I just made up my mind to do it really and truly because what God counts is the intention. But I think people who are in Purgatory must know they are climbing up and have hope and Mary I think Im going down down down even though Ive stayed out of prisons some time now.

"Father O'Malley tells me that for everybody the battle is won or lost already in Gods sight and that though Satan thinks he has a good chance to conquer actually Satan has lost forever but doesnt know it. Mary I never did anybody any good but only harm to ones that loved me. If just once before I die I could do one Signal Act that was truly good then God might love me and let me have the Beatific Vision. Yet Mary I know Im weak of will and a coward and lazy and Ive missed my chance forever.

"Well Mary my only sister Ive bored you long enough and I just wanted to say hello and tell you to be of good cheer. Im sorry I whined and complained like a little boy about my health because Im still strong and deserve all the pain I get. Mary if you can forgive your big brother who never grew up please pray for me some time because nobody else does except possibly Father O'Malley when he isnt busy with other prayers. I pray for Mother every night and every other night for you and once a month for Dad. You were a good little girl and sweet. Now I will say good bye and ask your pardon for bothering you with my foolishness. Also Im sorry your friends found out I was just a hobo when I was with you 9 years ago and I dont blame you for being angry with me then for talking too much and I know I wasnt fit to lodge in your house. There arent many of us old real hobos left only beatniks and such that cant walk or chop wood and I guess that is just as well. It is a degrading life Mary

but I cant stop walking down that long long trail not knowing where it ends.

“Your Loving Brother
“Francis (Frank)

“P.S.: I dont wish to mislead so I will add Mary that the people who own this house didnt exactly ask me in but its alright because I wont do any harm here but a little good if I can. Good night again Mary.”

Now he needed an envelope, but he had forgotten to take one from the last motel, where the Presbyterian minister had put him up. There must be some in Tamarack House, and one would not be missed, and that would not be very wrong because he would take nothing else. He found no envelopes in the drawer of the library table: so he went up the stairs and almost knocked at the closed door of Allegra's Room. Foolish! He opened the door gently.

He had admired Allegra's small rosewood desk. In its drawer was a leather letter-folder, the kind with a blotter, he found, and in the folder were several yellowed envelopes. Also lying face up in the folder was a letter of several small pages, in a woman's hand, a trifle shaky. He started to sit down to read Allegra's letter that was never sent to anybody, but it passed through his mind that his great body might break the delicate rosewood chair that belonged to Allegra, so he read the letter standing. It was dated January 14, 1969. On that birthday of his, he had been in Joliet prison.

How beautifully Allegra wrote!

“Darling Celia,

“This is a lonely day at Tamarack House, just fifty-four years after your great-great-grandfather the General died, so I am writing to my grand-niece to tell you how much I hope you will be able to come up to Anthonyville and stay with me next summer—if I still am here. The doctor says that only God knows whether I will be. Your grandmother wants me to come down your way

to stay with her for the rest of this winter, but I can't bear to leave Tamarack House at my age, for they might have to put me in a rest-home down there and then I wouldn't see this old house again.

"I am all right, really, because kind Mr. Connor looks in every day, and Mrs. Williams comes every other day to clean. I am not sick, my little girl, but simply older than my years, and running down. When you come up next summer, God willing, I will make you that soft toast you like, and perhaps Mr. Connor will turn the crank for the ice-cream, and I may try to make some preserves with you to help me.

"You weren't lonely, were you, when you stayed with me last summer for a whole month? Of course there are fewer than a hundred people left in Anthonyville now, and most of those are old. They say that there will be practically nobody living in the town a few years from now, when the new highway is completed and the old one is abandoned. There were more than two thousand people here in town and roundabout, a few years after the General built Tamarack House! But first the lumber industry gave out, and then the mines were exhausted, and the prison-break in 1915 scared many away forever. There are no passenger trains now, and they say the railway line will be pulled out altogether when the new freeway—they have just begun building it to the east—is ready for traffic. But we still have the maples and the tamaracks, and there are ever so many raccoons and opossums and squirrels for you to watch—and a lynx, I think, and an otter or two, and many deer.

"Celia, last summer you asked me about the General's death and all the things that happened then, because you had heard something of them from your Grandmother Edith. But I didn't wish to frighten you, so I didn't tell you everything. You are older now, and you have a right to know, because when you grow up you will be one of the trustees of the Anthony Family Trust, and then this old house will be in your charge when I am gone. Tamarack House is not at all frightening, except a

little in the morning on every January 14. I do hope that you and the other trustees will keep the house always, with the money that Father left to me—he was good at making money, even though the forests vanished and the mines failed, by his investments in Chicago—and which I am leaving to the Family Trust. I've kept the house just as it was, for the sake of the General's memory and because I love it that way.

"You asked just what happened on January 14, 1915. There were seven people who slept in the house that month—not counting Cook and Cynthia (who was a kind of nannie to us girls and also cleaned), because they slept at their houses in the village. In the house, of course, was the General, my grandfather, your great-great-grandfather, who was nearly eighty years old. Then there were Father and Mama, and the three of us little sisters, and dear Frank.

"Alice and sometimes even that baby Edith used to tease me in those days by screaming, 'Frank's Allegra's sweetheart! Frank's Allegra's sweetheart!' I used to chase them, but I suppose it was true: he liked me best. Of course he was about sixty years old, though not so old as I am now, and I was a little thing. He used to take me through the swamps and show me the muskrats' houses. The first time he took me on such a trip, Mama raised her eyebrows when he was out of the room, but the General said, 'I'll warrant Frank; I have his papers.' Alice and Edith might just as well have shouted, 'Frank's Allegra's slavel' He read to me—oh, Robert Louis Stevenson's poems and all sorts of books. I never had another sweetheart, partly because almost all the young men left Anthonyville as I grew up when there was no work for them here, and the ones that remained didn't please Mama.

"We three sisters used to play Creepmouse with Frank, I remember well. We would be the Creepmice, and would sneak up and scare him when he wasn't watching, and he would pretend to be terrified. He made up a little song for us—or, rather, he put words to some tune he had borrowed:

'Down, down, down in Creepmouse Town
All the lamps are low,
And the little rodent feet
Softly come and go

'There's a rat in Creepmouse Town
And a bat or two:
Everything in Creepmouse Town
Would swiftly frighten you!'

"Do you remember, Celia, that the General was State Supervisor of Prisons and Reformatories for time out of mind? He was a good architect, too, and designed Anthonyville State Prison, without taking any fee for himself, as a model prison. Some people in the capital said that he did it to give employment to his county, but really it was because the site was so isolated that it would be difficult for convicts to escape.

"The General knew Frank's last name, but he never told the rest of us. Frank had been in Anthonyville State Prison at one time, and later other prisons, and the General had taken him out of one of those other prisons on parole, having known Frank when he was locked up at Anthonyville. I never learned what Frank had done to be sentenced to prison, but he was gentle with me and everybody else, until that early morning of January 14.

"The General was amused by Frank, and said that Frank would be better off with us than anywhere else. So Frank became our hired man, and chopped the firewood for us, and kept the fires going in the stoves and fireplaces, and sometimes served at dinner. In summer he was supposed to scythe the lawns, but of course summer didn't come. Frank arrived by train at Anthonyville Station in October, and we gave him the little room at the top of the house.

"Well, on January 12 Father went off to Chicago on business. We still had the General. Every night he barred the shutters on the ground floor, going round to all the rooms by himself.

Mama knew he did it because there was a rumor that some life convicts at the Prison 'had it in' for the Supervisor of Prisons, although the General had retired five years earlier. Also they may have thought he kept a lot of money in the house—when actually, what with the timber gone and the mines going, in those times we were rather hard pressed and certainly kept our money in the bank at Duluth. But we girls didn't know why the General closed the shutters, except that it was one of the General's rituals. Besides, Anthonyville State Prison was supposed to be escape-proof. It was just that the General always took precautions, though ever so brave.

"Just before dawn, Celia, on the cold morning of January 14, 1915, we all were waked by the siren of the Prison, and we all rushed downstairs in our nightclothes, and we could see that part of the Prison was afire. Oh, the sky was red! The General tried to telephone the Prison, but he couldn't get through, and later it turned out that the lines had been cut.

"Next—it all happened so swiftly—we heard shouting somewhere down Main Street, and then guns went off. The General knew what that meant. He had got his trousers and his boots on, and now he struggled with his old military overcoat, and he took his old army revolver. 'Lock the door behind me, girl,' he told Mama. She cried and tried to pull him back inside, but he went down into the snow, nearly eighty though he was.

"Only three or four minutes later, we heard the shots. The General had met the convicts at the gate. It was still dark, and the General had cataracts on his eyes. They say he fired first, and missed. Those bad men had broken into Mr. Emmons's store and taken guns and axes and whiskey. They shot the General—shot him again and again and again.

"The next thing we knew, they were chopping at our front door with axes. Mama hugged us.

"Celia dear, writing all this has made me so silly! I feel a little odd, so I must go lie down for an hour or two before telling you the rest. Celia, I do hope you will love this old house as much

as I have. If I'm not here when you come up, remember that where I have gone I will know the General and Father and Mama and Alice and poor dear Frank, and will be ever so happy with them. Be a good little girl, my Celia."

The letter ended there, unsigned.

Frank clumped downstairs to the Sunday parlor. He was crying, for the first time since he had fought that professional heavyweight on October 19, 1943. Allegra's letter—if only she'd finished it! What had happened to those little girls, and Mama, and that other Frank? He thought of something from the Holy Bible: "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

Already it was almost evening. He lit the wick in the cranberry-glass lamp that hung from the middle of the parlor ceiling, standing on a chair to reach it. Why not enjoy more light? On a whim, he arranged upon the round table four silver candlesticks that had rested above the fireplace. He needed three more, and those he fetched from the dining room. He lit every candle in the circle: one for the General, one for Father, one for Mama, one for Alice, one for Allegra, one for Edith—one for Frank.

The dear names of those little girls! He might as well recite aloud, it being good practice for the approaching days on the long, long trail:

*"I hear in the chamber above me
The patter of little feet,
The sound of a door that is opened,
And voices soft and sweet. . . ."*

Here he ceased. Had he heard something in the passage—or "descending the broad hall stair"? Because of the wind outside, he could not be certain. It cost him a gritting of his teeth to rise and open the parlor door. Of course no one could be seen in the hall or on the stair. "Crazy Frank," men had called him at Joliet and other

prisons: he had clenched his fists, but had kept a check upon himself. Didn't Saint Paul say that the violent take Heaven by storm? Perhaps he had barked up the wrong tree; perhaps he would be spewed out of His mouth for being too peaceful.

Shutting the door, he went back to the fireside. Those lines of Longfellow had been no evocation. He put "The Long, Long Trail" on the old phonograph again, strolling about the room until the record ran out. There was an old print of a Great Lakes schooner on one wall that he liked. Beside it, he noticed, there seemed to be some pellets embedded in a closet door-jamb, but painted over, as if someone had fired a shotgun in the parlor in the old days. "The violent take it by storm . . ." He admired the grand piano; perhaps Allegra had learned to play it. There was one or two big notches or gashes along one edge of the piano, varnished over, hard though that wood was. Then Frank sank into the big chair again and stared at the burning logs.

Just how long he had dozed, he did not know. He woke abruptly. Had he heard a whisper, the faintest whisper? He tensed to spring up. But before he could move, he saw reflections in the tall mirror.

Something had moved in the corner by the bookcase. No doubt about it; that small something had stirred again. Also something crept behind one of the satin sofas, and something else lurked near the piano. All these were at his back: he saw the reflections in the glass, as in a glass darkly, more alarming than physical forms. In this high shadowy room, the light of the kerosene lamp and of the seven candles did not suffice.

From near the bookcase, the first of them emerged into candle-light; then came the second, and the third. They were giggling, but he could not hear them—only see their faces, and those not clearly. He was unable to stir, and the gooseflesh prickled all over him, and his hair rose at the back of his big head.

They were three little girls, barefoot, in their long muslin night-gowns, ready for bed. One may have been as much as twelve years old, and the smallest was little more than a baby. The middle one was Allegra, tiny even for her tender years, and a little imp: he knew, he knew! They were playing Creepmouse.

The three of them stole forward, Allegra in the lead, her eyes alight. He could see them plain now, and the dread was ebbing out of him. He might have risen and turned to greet them across the great gulf of time, but any action—why, what might it do to these little ones? Frank sat frozen in his chair, looking at the nimble reflections in the mirror, and nearer they came, perfectly silent. Allegra vanished from the glass, which meant that she must be standing just behind him.

He must please them. Could he speak? He tried, and the lines came out hoarsely:

*"Down, down, down in Creepmouse Town
All the lamps are low,
And the little rodent feet . . ."*

He was not permitted to finish. Wow! There came a light tug at the curly white hair on the back of his head. Oh, to talk with Allegra, the imp! Reckless, he heaved his bulk out of the chair, and swung round—too late.

The parlor door was closing. But from the hall came another whisper, ever so faint, ever so unmistakable: "Good night, Frank!" There followed subdued giggles, scampering, and then the silence once more.

He strode to the parlor door. The hall was empty again, and the broad stair. Should he follow them up? No, all three would be abed now. Should he knock at Mama's Room, muttering, "Mrs. Anthony, are the children all right?" No, he hadn't the nerve for that, and it would be presumptuous. He had been given one moment of perception, and no more.

Somehow he knew that they would not go so far as the garret floor. Ah, he needed fresh air! He snuffed out lamp and candles, except for one candlestick—Allegra's—that he took with him. Out into the hall he went. He unfastened the front door with that oaken patch about the middle of it, and stepped upon the porch, leaving the burning candle just within the hall. The wind had risen again, bringing still more snow. It was black as sin outside, and the temperature must be thirty below.

To him the wind bore one erratic peal of the desolate church-bell of Anthonyville, and then another. How strong the blast must be through that belfry! Frank retreated inside from that unfathomable darkness and that sepulchral bell which seemed to toll for him. He locked the thick door behind him and screwed up his courage for the expedition to his room at the top of the old house.

But why shudder? He loved them now, Allegra most of all. Up the broad stairs to the second floor he went, hearing only his own clumsy footfalls, and past the clay-sealed doors of the General and Father and Mama and Alice and Allegra and Edith. No one whispered, no one scampered.

In Frank's Room, he rolled himself in his blankets and quilt (had Allegra helped stitch the patchwork?), and almost at once the consciousness went out of him, and he must have slept dreamless for the first night since he was a farm boy.

So profound had been his sleep, deep almost as death, that the siren may have been wailing for some minutes before at last it roused him. Frank knew that horrid sound: it had called for him thrice before, as he fled from prisons. Who wanted him now? He heaved his ponderous body out of the warm bed. The candle that he had brought up from the Sunday parlor and left burning all night was flickering in its socket, but by that flame he could see the hour on his watch: seven o'clock, too soon for dawn.

Through the narrow skylight, as he flung on his clothes, the sky glowed an unnatural red, though it was long before sunup. The prison siren ceased to wail, as if choked off. Frank lumbered to the little frieze-window, and saw to the north, perhaps two miles distant, a monstrous mass of flame shooting high into the air. The prison was afire.

Then came shots outside: first the bark of a heavy revolver, followed irregularly by blasts of shotguns or rifles. Frank was lacing his boots with a swiftness uncongenial to him. He got into his overcoat as there came a crashing and battering down below. That sound, too, he recognized, wood-chopper that he had been: axes shattering the front door.

Amid this pandemonium, Frank was too bewildered to grasp altogether where he was or even how this catastrophe might be fitted into the pattern of time. All that mattered was flight; the scheme of his escape remained clear in his mind. Pull up the chair below the skylight, heave yourself out to the upper roof, descend those iron rungs to the woodshed roof, make for the other side of the freeway, then — why, then you must trust to circumstance, Frank. It's that long, long trail a-winding for you.

Now he heard a woman screaming within the house, and slipped and fumbled in his alarm. He had got upon the chair, opened the skylight, and was trying to obtain a good grip on the icy outer edge of the skylight-frame, when someone knocked and kicked at the door of Frank's Room.

Yet those were puny knocks and kicks. He was about to heave himself upward when, in a relative quiet — the screaming had ceased for a moment — he heard a little shrill voice outside his door, urgently pleading: "Frank, Frank, let me in!"

He was arrested in flight as though great weights had been clamped to his ankles. That little voice he knew, as if it were part of him: Allegra's voice.

For a brief moment he still meant to scramble out the skylight. But the sweet little voice was begging. He stumbled off the chair, upset it, and was at the door in one stride.

"Is that you, Allegra?"

"Open it, Frank, *please* open it!"

He turned the key and pulled the bolt. On the threshold the little girl stood, indistinct by the dying candlelight, terribly pale, all tears, frantic.

Frank snatched her up. Ah, this was the dear real Allegra Anthony, all warm and soft and sobbing, flesh and blood! He kissed her cheek gently.

She clung to him in terror, and then squirmed loose, tugging at his heavy hand: "Oh, Frank, come on! Come downstairs! They're hurting Mama!"

"Who is, little girl?" He held her tiny hand, his body quivering with dread and indecision. "Who's down there, Allegra?"

"The bad men! *Come on, Frank!*" Braver than he, the little thing plunged back down the garret stair into the blackness below.

"Allegra! Come back here—come back now!" He bellowed it, but she was gone.

Up two flights of stairs, there poured to him a tumult of shrieks, curses, laughter, breaking noises. Several men were below, their speech slurred and raucous. He did not need Allegra to tell him what kind of men they were, for he heard prison slang and prison foulness, and he shook all over. There still was the skylight.

He would have turned back to that hole in the roof, had not Allegra squealed in pain somewhere on the second floor. Dazed, trembling, unarmed, Frank went three steps down the garret staircase. "Allegra! Little girl! What is it, Allegra?"

Someone was charging up the stair toward him. It was a burly man in the prison uniform, a lighted lantern in one hand and a glittering axe in the other. Frank had no time to turn. The man screeched obscenely at him, and swung that axe.

In those close quarters, wielded by a drunken man, it was a chancy weapon. The edge shattered the plaster wall; the flat of the blade thumped upon Frank's shoulder. Frank, lurching forward, took the man by the throat with a mighty grip. They all tumbled pellmell down the steep stairs—the two men, the axe, the lantern.

Frank's ursine bulk landed atop the stranger's body, and Frank heard his adversary's bones crunch. The lantern had broken and gone out. The convict's head hung loose on his shoulders, Frank found as he groped for the axe. Then he trampled over the fallen man and flung himself along the corridor, gripping the axe-helve. "Allegra! Allegra girl!"

From the head of the main stair, he could see that the lamps and candles were burning in the hall and in the rooms of the ground floor. All three children were down there, wailing, and above their noise rose Mama's shrieks again. A mob of men were stamping, breaking things, roaring with amusement and desire, shouting filth. A bottle shattered.

His heart pounding as if it would burst out of his chest, Frank

hurried rashly down that stair and went, all crimson with fury, into the Sunday parlor, the double-bitted axe swinging in his hand. They all were there: the little girls, Mama, and five wild men. "Stop that!" Frank roared with all the power of his lungs. "You let them go!"

Everyone in the parlor stood transfixed at that summons like the Last Trump. Allegra had been tugging pathetically at the leg of a dark man who gripped her mother's waist, and the other girls sputtered and sobbed, cornered, as a tall man poured a bottle of whiskey over them. Mrs. Anthony's gown was ripped nearly its whole length, and a third man was bending her backward by her long hair, as if he would snap her spine. Near the hall door stood a man like a long lean rat, the Rat of Creepmouse Town, a shotgun on his arm, gape-jawed at Frank's intervention. Guns and axes lay scattered about the Turkey carpet. By the fireplace, a fifth man had been heating the poker in the flames.

For that tableau-moment, they all stared astonished at the raving giant who had burst upon them; and the giant, puffing, stared back with his strange blue eyes. "Oh, Frank!" Allegra sobbed: it was more command than entreaty—as if, Frank thought in a flash of insane mirth, he were like the boy in the fairy tale who could cry confidently, "All heads off but mine!"

He knew what these men were, the rats and bats of Creepmouse Town: the worst men in any prison, lifers who had made their hell upon earth, killers all of them and worse than killers. The rotten damnation showed in all those flushed and drunken faces. Then the dark man let go of Mama and said in relief, with a coughing laugh, "Hell, it's only old Punkinhead Frank, clowning again! Have some fun for yourself, Frank boy!"

"Hey, Frank," Ratface asked, his shotgun crooked under his arm, "where'd the old man keep his money?"

Frank towered there perplexed, the berserker-lust draining out of him, almost bashful—and frightened worse than ever before in all his years on the trail. What should he shout now? What should he do? Who was he to resist such perfect evil? They were five to one, and those five were fiends from down under, and that one a coward.

Long ago he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

Mama was the first to break the tableau. Her second captor had relaxed his clutch upon her hair, and she prodded the little girls before her, and she leaped for the door.

The hair-puller was after her at once, but she bounded past Ratface's shotgun, which had wavered toward Frank, and Alice and Edith were ahead of her. Allegra, her eyes wide and desperate, tripped over the rung of a broken chair. Everything happened in half a second. The hair-puller caught Allegra by her little ankle.

Then Frank bellowed again, loudest in all his life, and he swung his axe high above his head and downward, a skillful dreadful stroke, catching the hair-puller's arm just below the shoulder. At once the man began to scream and spout, while Allegra fled after her mother.

Falling, the hair-puller collided with Ratface, spoiling his aim, but one barrel of the shotgun fired, and Frank felt pain in his side. His bloody axe on high, he hulked between the five men and the door.

All the men's faces were glaring at Frank, incredulously, as if demanding how he dared stir against them. Three convicts were scrabbling tipsily for weapons on the floor. As Frank strode among them, he saw the expression on those faces change from gloating to desperation. Just as his second blow descended, there passed through his mind a kind of fleshly collage of death he had seen once at a farm-yard gate: the corpses of five weasels nailed to a gatepost by the farmer, their frozen open jaws agape like damned souls in Hell.

"All heads off but mine!" Frank heard himself braying. "All heads off but mine!" He hacked and hewed, his own screams of lunatic fury drowning their screams of terror.

For less than three minutes, shots, thuds, shrieks, crashes, terrible wailing. They could not get past him to the doorway.

"Come on!" Frank was raging as he stood in the middle of the parlor. "Come on, who's next? All heads off but mine! Who's next?"

There came no answer but a ghastly rattle from one of the five heaps that littered the carpet. Blood-soaked from hair to boots, the berserker towered alone, swaying where he stood.

His mind began to clear. He had been shot twice, Frank guessed, and the pain at his heart was frightful. Into his frantic consciousness burst all the glory of what he had done, and all the horror.

He became almost rational; he must count the dead. One upstairs, five here. One, two, three, four, five heaps. That was correct: all present and accounted for, Frank boy, Punkinhead Frank, Crazy Frank: all dead and accounted for. Had he thought that thought before? Had he taken that mock roll before? Had he wrought this slaughter twice over, twice in this same old room?

But where were Mama and the little girls? They mustn't see this blood-splashed inferno of a parlor. He was looking at himself in the tall mirror, and he saw a bear-man loathsome with his own blood and others' blood. He looked like the Wild Man of Borneo. In abhorrence he flung his axe aside. Behind him sprawled the reflections of the hacked dead.

Fighting down his heart-pain, he reeled into the hall. "Little girls! Mrs. Anthony! Allegra, oh, Allegra!" His voice was less strong. "Where are you? It's safe now!"

They did not call back. He labored up the main stair, clutching his side. "Allegra, speak to your Frank!" They were in none of the bedrooms.

He went up the garret stair, then, whatever the agony, and beyond Frank's Room to the cupola stair, and ascended that slowly, gasping hard. They were not in the cupola. Might they have run out among the trees? In that cold dawn, he stared on every side; he thought his sight was beginning to fail.

He could see no one outside the house. The drifts still choked the street beyond the gateposts, and those two boulders protruded impassive from untrodden snow. Back down the flights of stairs he made his way, clutching at the rail, at the wall. Surely the little girls hadn't strayed into that parlor butcher-shop? He bit his lip and peered into the Sunday parlor.

The bodies all were gone. The splashes and ropy strands of blood all were gone. Everything stood in perfect order, as if violence never

had touched Tamarack House. The sun was rising, and sunlight filtered through the shutters. Within fifteen minutes, the trophies of his savage victory had disappeared.

It was like the recurrent dream which had tormented Frank when he was little: he separated from Mother in the dark, wandering solitary in empty lanes, no soul alive in the universe but little Frank. Yet those tremendous axe-blows had severed living flesh and bone, and for one moment, there on the stairs, he had held in his arms a tiny quick Allegra; of that reality he did not doubt at all.

Wonder subduing pain, he staggered to the front door. It stood unshattered. He drew the bar and turned the key, and went down the stone steps into the snow. He was weak now, and did not know where he was going. Had he done a Signal Act? Might the Lord give him one parting glimpse of little Allegra, somewhere among these trees? He slipped in a drift, half rose, sank again, crawled. He found himself at the foot of one of those boulders—the further one, the stone he had not inspected.

The snow had fallen away from the face of the bronze tablet. Clutching the boulder, Frank drew himself up. By bringing his eyes very close to the tablet, he could read the words, a dying man panting against deathless bronze:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF

FRANK

A SPIRIT IN PRISON, MADE FOR ETERNITY

WHO SAVED US AND DIED FOR US

JANUARY 14, 1915

*"Why, if the Soul can fling the Dust aside,
And naked on the Air of Heaven ride,*

*Were't not a Shame—were't not a Shame for him
In this clay carcass crippled to abide?"*

SAVIOURGATE



*This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
—Every nighte and alle,
Fire and sleet and candle-lighte,
And Christe receive thy saule.*

A LYKE-WAKE DIRGE

THIS OLD STREET, scarcely wider than a lane, could not be long; at the far end of it there loomed the Norman tower of a parish church. Mark Findlay had a notion that if he were to hurry the length of the street and turn to the right beyond the church, he might reach a modern square with cinemas and a taxi-rank. Needing to catch the midnight train for London, he must find a cab soon.

And, his cough growing worse, he must get out of the wet. In Northminster, this Christmas Eve, a light snow had fallen and then melted, lingering as fog. Between trains he had strolled the streets for nearly three hours, his head so filled with worries that he scarcely had noticed anything he passed. Looking back the way he had come, and coughing hard, he saw by the great clock on the cathedral tower that it was nearly half-past eleven. In more ways than one, he had lost his sense of direction; he was uncertain what way the railway station lay.

This was a charming narrow street of Georgian houses, or perhaps some of them from Queen Anne's time, two or three little white-washed steps going up to each door—that he could make out through the low-lying chilly mist. There seemed to be no shopfronts, and only

one hanging signboard, a few yards directly in front of him, visible by gaslight (this being, perhaps, the only lane in Northminster still lit by gas-lamps):

THE CROSSKEYS

PAUL MARRINER, RESIDENT MANAGER

Above this gilt lettering was the well-painted symbol of two crossed keys. Decades ago, had he glimpsed this street sometime? He had been in Northminster only once before, early in the War: much of the town had been uglified since then, but this street—supposing it to be the same street—looked unchanged. Had he seen that pub-sign before?

As he lingered on the corner, coughing ferociously, a clergyman brushed past him in the dim light. "Could you tell me . . ." Findlay began; but the parson hurried on, umbrella over his head. Perhaps he had taken Findlay for a tramp, what with his cough, his pale face, and his mud-splashed coat. Someone else, looking rather like a civil servant, was striding in the opposite direction on the other side of the street.

"I'm sorry, but could you help me?" Findlay called to him. A smug face was turned toward him briefly, but there was no slackening of pace, and the second man went round the corner.

Somewhere he must get directions. Should he go a few paces down that street, ring the bell for the porter—if there might be a night porter at a small hotel of this sort, nowadays—and ask his way to a cab-rank or to the station? He hesitated; for the past several months, he had evaded most decisions, big or small.

Yes, he had best try the Crosskeys. The stained-glass windows were alight in that church at the far end, Findlay noticed as he made his way past the Georgian doors, and a bell was tolling from the tower. Just as he was about to mount the stone steps, another coughing fit racked him. Bent and hacking, he leaned against the bow-front of the Crosskeys.

Then the hotel door opened, and down the steps to him came a lean man. "That's a graveyard cough," the man said, sympatheti-

cally. "I could hear you in the parlor. 'It wasn't the cough that carried him off, but the coffin they carried him off in.' Do come in for a whiskey."

Startled, Findlay contrived to gasp, "I need to catch a train." The man had taken his arm: a forceful tall man with a whimsical handsome face.

"Hacking like that, you'd never reach the station," this stranger—or was he quite a stranger?—told him. "I'll see that you make your train, if you must." He held open the heavy door. Within, the corridor was warm and colorful, with dark oak wainscoting and good framed prints on the walls.

"But it's after hours," Findlay protested.

"Oh, the public bar is closed, but at the Crosskeys they always can serve something to a bona-fide traveller like you." The man was briskly helping him off with his muddy coat. "Come into the residents' parlor. I've put up for the night, and the manager knows me."

"I don't think that there's time," Findlay muttered as he was propelled into the parlor. This insistent host, who seemed tolerably sober, spoke like an educated man and behaved like an officer.

"Time!" The lean man chuckled. "'It's time, gentlemen, time!' That's no problem for you and me, is it? I say, you're a Canadian, aren't you? I know you. You're Findlay, Mark Findlay. I was thinking of you—coincidence, I'd have said once—before I heard that cough of yours in the street."

Findlay stared into that confident face. Had he known this man? A certain recklessness made those bold features memorable. Perhaps this man had been a soldier. To Findlay came some faint memory of an hour's tipsy talk, a curious conversation, with a man who had looked rather like this, long ago. Some chance acquaintance, but encountered where?

"Did we meet—why, right here, in '39?" Findlay inquired. "I'm sorry, but I don't recall your name."

"I'm Ralph Bain. Of course it's here. Take that chair, the leather one, Findlay. Jimmie!"

A corpulent florid-faced porter or waiter, in scarlet jacket and

brass buttons, ambled toward them. "Whiskey-and-sodas, Jimmie," Bain ordered, "and put more coals on that fire. You remember Mr. Findlay, Jimmie. He's passing through Northminster—unless, after all, we can persuade him to take a room. Anyhow, he's bona fide."

"It's your sort that makes this job a pleasure, Mr. Findlay, sir," said Jimmie, who was an Irishman. The fire blazed up on the broad hearth below the Adam chimneypiece; the whiskey glasses came promptly on a heavy silver tray. Findlay had ceased to cough. Surely this was the jolly hotel of his dim memory, with the faded upholstery or shiny leather of its easy chairs, the green draperies of its tall windows, the solid dark furniture of yesteryear, the big Oriental rug a trifle frayed, and especially that massive-framed painting of the Highland cattle. Now he even recalled the looming silver tea-urn on the mahogany sideboard.

A few people still sat in this residents' parlor, perhaps waiting for the midnight peal from the cathedral's bells. Several of them had nodded to him, or smiled at him, when Bain almost had forced him into an armchair, and an old lady had said, "Good evening." Could he have seen her before, and perhaps the granddaughter or girl companion beside her? Ralph Bain he did recollect fairly well, by this time: rather a wag, this Bain, he recalled, with a talent for telling stories that seemed tall. They had taken to each other, he and Bain, when in that year so long vanished they had happened to fall into talk in this very pub. The Bain of Findlay's memory had seemed no younger than the man who sat opposite him now; his host must be remarkably preserved, not a grey hair to his head. Did he dye?

Bain had been chatting with him lightly for several minutes, but Findlay—needing to catch that train and fretting about tomorrow's hard decisive conference—scarcely had paid attention. What a heartening room this was, everyone in it good-natured and healthy-looking! The sound of the ancient church-bell penetrated through the thick drapes of the bow-front; yes, it was a single bell tolling, not a peal. At any moment, Findlay feared, the tolling might be mingled with the chimes of the cathedral clock sounding the third quarter of the hour—which would mean that he'd have a narrow squeak to

make his train, even though the trains generally ran late or lingered at the platform.

Bain noticed that his guest was listening to the bell. "That's a good sound, isn't it, Findlay? Lord knows when that church commenced the custom. There was a Saxon or Danish church on the site, you know. The day before Christmas, from time out of mind, they've tolled that bell from early morning to midnight, one stroke for every year since the Nativity. The church is our friend Canon Hoodman's, you remember, besides his being chapter treasurer. They must be coming close to stroke one thousand, nine hundred, and thirty-nine. Shall we drink to that?"

"Thanks, Mr. Bain," Findlay heard himself saying—he was drowsy in this cordial room, after the long ride down from Aberdeen and after tramping those Northminster streets in miserable vacillation—"but no. I'd order another round for us, except for my train. I'm going to have to say good night. We keep a flat in Aberdeen now, and if ever you get to . . ."

"Call me Bain, or Ralph, or Rafe. That whiskey's your medicine, Findlay; I told you so before your cough stopped. As for the train—why, you'll be aboard it, if you really mean to be; I give you my word. I'll see you to the cab. 'We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow.' Forgive me, but you've not been long this side of the Border, I take it?"

"I came down from Aberdeen today, Bain. And if I don't meet three important men for breakfast at the Hyde Park Hotel"—here Findlay grimaced—"it's all up with me. I've been in oil rigs in Aberdeen for the past two years, and I'm not so young as I was, and my wife is in a bad way. Now I'm in deep trouble—not enough ready money, and the banks pressing me hard about overdrafts."

The careless smile faded from Bain's mouth. Bain stared at him incredulously. "Why, Findlay, that sort of thing doesn't signify for you and me here, you know. Overdrafts! Or don't you know? Don't you actually? The moment I dragged you in, I thought you seemed a bit odd. If you don't mind my saying so, it was as if I'd taken hold on a ghost. I'm told that some people scarcely are aware of the change

when they've just crossed the Border. If you don't mind, Mark Findlay, old man—just how was it you died?"

Jimmie was setting two more whiskies before them on the little Indian table; Bain must have given him a sign. The cozy parlor went round for Findlay.

Hadn't he thought too often of dying, and dying swiftly, whatever the consequences? Hadn't he thought of that escape all the hours he'd walked those Northminster streets? Did the death-urge show in his face?

For a moment, the two commercial travellers in the corner, and the old lady with her girl companion, and smiling Jimmie, seemed to fade into nothingness. Findlay saw only Bain's daredevil face, gone sober and pallid on the instant. Had one whiskey been too many for Bain, or for himself?

"What do you mean?" Findlay tried not to stammer. "I'm no deader than you are. I might as well be dead, though, if I'm not in London eight hours from now."

"Dead!" Bain laughed, though it seemed to require some effort from him—almost as if Bain were frightened. "Of course we're not dead, old man. Here, do *I* seem dead?" Leaning forward, he gripped Findlay's hand. "There, a good fleshly shake, eh? We wouldn't be just here if we were dead, truly dead, would we, Findlay? I put the question to you too bluntly—that's one of my silly habits, got in the army. What I meant to say was this: how did you cross the Border?" Bain drank, and then resumed.

"There's no harm in calling it 'dying.' We all have to pass through the jaws of death to reach the Crosskeys or any other good sort of place—corruption putting on incorruption, and all that. We all have to die so that we can rise, don't we? Was it hard, your crossing? Is the Crosskeys the first place you've come to, this side of eternity? If so, there's the more honor for me, as the first friend to greet you."

Bain drained his glass. "Now drink your dram, old man, because there's nothing left for us to fret about, never, never. 'It wasn't the cough that carried him off, but the coffin they carried him off in.'"

I say—could it have been that you crossed the Border just outside the door of this hotel, when I heard you hacking there?”

Findlay stood up. Was this host of his drunk, or was he a lunatic? Bain seemed neither, but he might be both. Had he and Bain talked of something like this, so long ago? Not this precisely, but something about death and eternity? Findlay couldn't be bothered, though Bain was rather amusing, not with that train to catch.

“Thanks again,” he told Bain. “My train won't wait. And it's not just my own future depending on that breakfast tomorrow: there's my wife, my sick wife, to think of. Good night. If you're ever at Aberdeen . . .”

“You really don't follow me, do you, old man?” Bain frowned in seeming perplexity. “If you leave now, you'll miss Canon Hoodman. Train won't wait? Why, any train you want will be waiting for you whenever you want it. I'll be taking a train myself to Ayrshire, after a night or two here at the Crosskeys; there's a young woman I mean to walk the moors with. Time doesn't signify: there's no Time for you and me, thank God, Findlay. Why, we've not even begun to talk. How can I explain? You and I aren't dead, though I died once, and I suppose you have, too. We've just begun to live fully. Look here, Mark Findlay: do you believe what you read in the papers?”

“Half the time. Excuse me, but where did you hang my hat and coat?”

“Jimmie!” Bain called. But he did not tell Jimmie to fetch his guest's coat and hat. “Jimmie, find us today's *Post*—and the *Times*, too. Mr. Findlay needs to see them.”

Newspapers, inserted in those oldfangled wooden rods, were hanging by the sideboard. It passed through Findlay's mind that the Crosskeys Hotel, like a beetle of a hostelry preserved in amber, retained amenities that had vanished nearly everywhere else. Jimmie brought two papers. They were full of news about the military stalemate. On the front page of both, the date was 24th December, 1939.

“What in hell is this?” Findlay was two-thirds angry. “It was 1939 when I came to Northminster the first time.”

"That is now," said Bain. "There's only now, praise be: whatever 'now' you like, whatever 'now' I like. Sit down, old man. You need somebody with a head and a tongue better than mine to inform you. I say, Jimmie: Canon Hoodman still is in the house, talking with Mr. Marriner. Could you give him my compliments and ask him to join us, if it's no trouble to him? Tell him that I may have a ghost to show him."

Well, in any event he must have missed his train by this time, Findlay reckoned. After all, how much did that matter? Those three insufferable men at the Hyde Park Hotel would do nothing for him, as the odds stood. The intended meeting had been a last forlorn hope. Fortune had conspired against him, and the stars in their courses. He might as well finish this whiskey; he might as well finish many whiskies. Now it was all over for him, and all over for Marian, poor sick Marian. She had told him he would fail; his nerve had failed him, and he had failed her.

In his bag, at the station luggage-room, there lay secreted a sufficient quantity of prescribed capsules, long hoarded. He had feared that he might require them, the whole lot of them, after that Hyde Park breakfast. After he should leave this hotel, he could swallow them at the station, without having to face that grim breakfast after all. Now he had all the time in the world. If a coroner should call it an overdose, there would be some insurance-money left for Marian, anyway, despite their having borrowed heavily these past six months. "It is a far, far better thing I do . . ." Findlay sat down again. There were worse places to spend one's last evening than this snug and well-appointed hotel parlor, with this friendly madman to entertain him.

"Jimmie," said Findlay, "another round of drinks. Nothing matters now."

Bain had been peering at him, as if doubting whether this guest were flesh and blood. "Actually," Bain said, "it *does* matter, don't you know, old man. It matters if you've not yet crossed the Border. It matters if really you're here at the Crosskeys by some uncanny chance

—or by providence, I should say. If you're to understand Canon Hoodman, who explains mysteries as well as anybody could, you're not to be half-seas over. I beg your pardon. Jimmie, forget those whiskey-sodas, and bring us a pot of tea—and some sandwiches, Jimmie."

His last slim hope of survival abandoned, Findlay was willing to humor this quizzical lunatic called Ralph Bain. He did feel hungry, after those vain bewildered hours in the foggy streets.

"All right," he told Bain, "have your fun with me. That was a clever ploy, putting those old newspapers on the racks. Were you merely hoping that some fool, any fool, might come in tonight to be teased by you? Or do you play these macabre tricks at this hotel every night? Why am I a ghost, and not you?"

"It's a private joke, very nearly, that 'ghost,'" Bain said. "The Canon and I call anybody a ghost who turns up here, or turns up anywhere else in eternity, but doesn't belong: anybody who hasn't properly crossed the Border, but gets into eternity somehow—for a moment, so to speak—and then passes back into Time again. Let me tell you, Findlay, you're a rarity: here at the old Crosskeys, on Christmas Eve, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and thirty-nine, reading in the papers about the Twilight War, you're experiencing a timeless moment. You're in two states of being simultaneously, I fancy."

Bain leaned toward him earnestly. "Yet I don't think you've passed through the jaws of death. The Canon says he's met such people more than once, but I haven't. You believe you're alive, and so you are—though not only in the way you think of 'life.' I fancy you'll leave this pleasant room, whenever you need to, and you'll catch that confounded train of yours, and you'll find yourself back in whatever year of grace you fancy you belong in. That's why I call you a ghost." Bain grinned at him reassuringly.

"You don't belong here, and yet you do belong. To me, you're unreal: you frighten me a trifle, as ghosts are supposed to do. The next thing I know, I may be looking straight through you to the back

of your chair. You needn't dread *me*. But here's the tea, and here's the Canon."

The Canon's grip was as hearty as Bain's. Canon Hoodman was a cheerful north-countryman with a broad mouth and thick spectacles. "You may not remember me, Mark Findlay," he began, "not just yet. Or you may recall only a few words we spoke to each other. If you like, I can offer you a good many more words now."

"Canon," Bain was saying, "I lug in an old acquaintance from the street, and then find that he's not crossed the Border, or so he says: it's a conundrum. When first you and Findlay and I sat down together, I wished we could go on talking forever. And here that possibility's come to pass, but Findlay doesn't understand, and he wants to be off immediately to his private misery."

Was this purported Canon some actor recruited by the whimsical Bain? Certainly Hoodman looked his part, collar and black suit and all. Findlay forced himself to enter into the spirit of this rag.

"Here's the question," Findlay told Hoodman: "Is Ralph Bain crazy, or am I? And I'd like to know what sort of innkeeper puts 1939 newspapers into this residents' parlor."

"You seem out of sorts, Findlay," Hoodman said, "but melancholy men are the wittiest. The manager of this hotel is a very sensible person, and he puts those papers there because he, like everybody else in this house, knows that tonight is Christmas Eve—the verger is nearly done tolling the bell in my old church—of the year of our Lord 1939."

Another wag! Findlay chuckled mordantly, pouring himself another cup of tea with a shaking hand. "Are you suggesting, Canon—if you really are a canon—that I'm in Hell, having coughed myself to death in the street outside, and that I'm condemned to spend eternity in this room, in a little pocket of Time called December the twenty-fourth, 1939?"

The Canon smiled a warm and humorous smile. "*Au contraire*, Findlay, if you and Bain and I were in Hell, I fancy we'd not be discussing these mysteries. The damned, as I understand it, have no

past and no future; no memories, no expectations. You're in a very different state from that."

This sly game was not unpleasant; and afterwards there would be those deadly capsules at the station, a door out of the prison-house of life, leading to the jail-yard. With that final ace in the hole, why not play up?

"Well, then, Canon Hoodman," Findlay went on, "if we three, and the other people in this parlor, are imprisoned forever in a cozy moment of Time, how is it that you and Bain talk of 'remembering' me; and how can I remember Bain, though I've forgotten you—if I ever met you before? If we're all dead men, how can we talk about memories and expectations—especially expectations?"

"I told you, old man," Bain thrust in, "we're *not* dead, none of us. We've come fully alive. And we're not locked up here; it's just that we've chosen, or fallen into, this one timeless moment. It's a good particular timeless moment, isn't it? No especial significance to it, I suppose: simply three friends arguing comfortably before a fire on a winter's night. But we have our choices of moments to experience afresh. It's up to you and the Canon and me, separately. This moment is a random sample of timeless moments; there are stronger moments, far stronger, for any of us. Why, if he chose just now, the Canon might be praying in some 'draughty church at smokefall,' I suppose; or I could be trading stories with some good chaps in a tent in the Western Desert, say, instead of disputing with you. It's a question of what you wish to experience all over again."

As they talked, the heavy tolling of that church-bell contributed to the illusion of timelessness that these two fantastics had contrived for him, Findlay thought. Outside in the street there sounded the foot-falls and murmuring of a good many people, with now and again children's laughter: folk on their way to midnight service at that church. The hotel was real, the people outside were real, these two clever companions of his were real; Findlay wondered about his own reality.

The Canon was speaking now. "Yes, all the good moments or

hours or days that you ever experienced are forever present to you, whenever you want them, after you've crossed the Border. We were told that we shall have bodies; we have them. You say that you've not yet crossed the Border, Findlay. Well, once you have crossed — and if really you're still in Time, that may be a long while yet for you — then, God willing, you'll understand as we two can't make you understand."

"What's wrong with the present everlasting moment?" Bain inquired. "Ah, I know: no cigars. Jimmie, fetch that box of cigars."

Findlay chose a cigar, presumably his last — a Burma cheroot. He seemed to recall that good Burma cheroots had been easier to find in 1939. Where nowadays did the resident manager of the Crosskeys obtain his supply?

"All right," Findlay responded, keeping his temper despite this waggery, "for the sake of argument I'll accept your metaphysics. We're not dead, but in eternity, you say. Well, what sort of great expectations are we supposed to indulge, aside from another sandwich and another cigar? You two talk well, but this occasion might turn boring if it were to run on forever."

The Canon took him up. "As Bain said, it's your choice of all you have experienced. Suppose that your wedding-day was among the best days of your life, Mark — of what you call your life. Think of this: you can experience that wedding whenever you like, for eternity."

"You mean that I can *remember* my wedding-day? I don't need you to tell me that, Canon. You mean that 'happiness is emotion recollected in tranquillity'? That's not enough for me: I don't have any tranquillity left."

The Canon shook his head amicably. "No, it's not memory that I mean. It's this, rather: if you are given grace, the good things of your life are *experienced*, in all the fullness of your senses, whenever you desire them. True, there's another side to the coin: if you have rejected the grace of God, then the evil things of your life are forever present, and you cannot escape them. This unexpected moment here in the Crosskeys may be a sign for you, Mark Findlay: a sign that you may know grace in death, if you choose it."

Ah, how these two jesters, these masters of the dry mock, stuck to their hobgoblin consistency! Findlay laughed sardonically. "So you two can convert yourselves into bridegrooms in the twinkling of an eye, whenever you're in that mood?"

"Not I," Bain admitted. "I never married. I joined my regiment a few weeks after we met here, Findlay, and I was good at killing but at nothing else. After El Alamein, where I took some bullets, they gave me the Military Cross. When the War was over, I got my little pension and drank hard every day. Any girl would have been an idiot to have married me. I asked one, and she said it never would do, and she was right. That's the young woman I mean to walk the moors with again, when I leave the Crosskeys."

"Why trouble yourself with her?" Findlay objected, grinning. "There's no marriage or giving in marriage, I'm told, where we three are supposed to be just now. Or can you have your fun all the same?"

"So far as marriage goes," Bain said quietly, "we don't *want* what we didn't know the other side of the Border. As for 'fun,' I found in the end that love was better."

"Have you ever read Augustine?" the Canon asked Findlay. "No? He learned that truth while he still was in Time."

"I take it, Canon, that you can chat with Saint Augustine whenever the fit is on you," Findlay scoffed, "and that Bain can play games with Helen of Troy."

"Oh, nothing of that sort." The Canon paused. "How may I make it clear? We live only once; and the experiences of that one active life are eternal. I don't meet Augustine in the Crosskeys Hotel, say, because he never was here, naturally, and because I wasn't at Hippo in the fifth century, naturally. Augustine and you and I are joined only through the Mystical Body. As for Bain—may I speak for you, Bain?—an hour's stroll on the moors with that lady, merely talking, means more to him than could the conquest of the face that launched a thousand ships. We don't long for the physical presence of Augustine or of Helen, because the reality which we know satisfies us—which it didn't when we were in Time. I don't mean that this fuller reality of ours is static. Instead, our awareness of every timeless

moment grows deeper and takes on more meaning. For a small instance, though you and I talked in this room before, you don't remember a word I said. I suspect, however, that you'll not forget what I am saying to you now."

"What about those 'expectations' of yours, when there's nothing new under the sun for you—when you do nothing but enlarge the same experiences?" Findlay thought he had caught this subtle canon there.

"Expectations, Findlay? This living moment in the Crosskeys isn't the whole of the life eternal—hardly." The Canon chuckled. "Nor is the reenactment of the love of created beings the whole of what we expect. You know the phrase 'the Beatific Vision.' Well, that's not a phrase only. That vision is yet to come, for Bain and for me. Perhaps we experience the Provisional Judgment now, and so remain tied, in some sense, to experiences within Time. When the Last Judgment is done, perhaps all expectations will be fulfilled, so that there will be nothing left to long for. These are only words to you? Formerly they were not much more than words to me. Words are tools that break in the hand. After you cross the Border, you will know truths that I cannot put into words for you."

There's the last desperate resort of parsons, Findlay thought: flight into bloodless abstractions, empty formulas. He would try another tack. "I fancy you must have been a model of propriety, Bain, to deserve a comfortable berth in eternity like this, eh?"

"I don't deserve it at all." Bain looked down at his strong hands. "I told you that I was good for nothing but killing, and that was true to the very end. Until almost the last, I was all ego, loving nobody but myself. My last action was to destroy a man, or what had been a man. Men are always saying that they'd die for this woman or that one. I said it, too; but what mattered, I did it—for that young woman I mentioned. I did it to shield her from somebody. And I took him with me. It was a beastly business on a high roof, and we went down together—into a river.

"Do you know, Findlay, ordinarily we don't talk about crossing the Border; I took the liberty of asking you how you crossed, but only

because I sensed that there was something peculiar about your coming. It's bad form, since nasty memories don't fit in here. Yet in its way, even that last fight of mine was a high experience. That one decent impulse of mine is why I'm in the same room with the Canon. Because of that violent act for love—she'd never have taken me—everything else that I'd done was forgiven."

Except for the tolling of the bell, there was silence for a little space. Findlay had to admire Bain for this consummate skill of straight-faced yarn-spinning. Then Bain added, "Now, beyond desire, I'm her friend, and know her always."

"Just like Dante and Beatrice," Findlay commented, puffing dryly on his cheroot.

"Rather," said the Canon, knocking the ash from his cigar. "Like Dante and Beatrice."

How often did these two saturnine comedians find the opportunity to pull some chance visitor's leg so systematically? "You gave your life, too, for a female friend, Canon Hoodman?"

"No," the Canon answered, "I had no choice as to how I crossed. My wife and I crossed together; I believe a bomb struck our old house in the Close; so we've never been parted. She'll be in the congregation when I give the homily at the midnight service, and we'll walk back to the Close together. People who come after us in Time don't know that handsome old house of ours, more's the pity; but nothing that's in Time can endure forever. For my wife and me, nevertheless, every stick and brick of that house endures in Eternity."

They couldn't really expect him to swallow all this farrago! Of course these two were aware that he knew they talked tongue in cheek; they hoped to provoke him into an outburst of indignation at such stuff and nonsense. Findlay wouldn't let them have that satisfaction. "So you have the pleasure of your wife's company, Canon," he said, smoothly, "and you enjoy your lady-friend's conversation, Bain. That's pleasant. But what about souls you're not so fond of? That man who rolled off the roof into the river with you, for instance, Bain?"

"That foul chap!" Bain blew a smoke-ring. "God only knows. You

can be sure our paths don't cross. In our Father's house are many mansions, but they're not all on the same floor."

Findlay yawned; the jest was wearing thin, and he was dog-tired, and in his luggage those capsules awaited him. These two jesters might be sobered by what they would read about him in tomorrow's papers. After all, his would be the cream of the jest.

"You're quite worn out, Findlay, I can see," the Canon was murmuring, "and we've been boring you. Jimmie, is Mr. Marriner still up? Good: ask him to come, if he has a moment."

The manager of this old-fashioned hotel turned out to be a small quick man with deep-set eyes. "Something for you, Captain Bain?"

"Marriner," Bain said to him, "our friend Findlay has come a long way. Show him one of your rooms, will you? He still thinks of taking a train, but he might be tempted. This is a very old house, Findlay, part of the building medieval—worth seeing, worth sleeping in."

"Would you prefer a haunted chamber, Mr. Findlay?" Marriner offered. Apparently he was a confederate of Bain and Hoodman. "I don't know that we can supply a spectral monk on demand, but there's a room available where Coleridge slept once."

Marriner led the three of them up a short flight of carpeted stairs, down a longish corridor, up a longer and steeper flight, and round a corner. Behind the door which he opened was a snug single bedroom, massive beams in its low ceiling, papered in blue, with a glistening old bedstead of some rare wood. "If you'd care to sleep deep, Mr. Findlay," Marriner said, "I'd wake you when you might require a call—supposing that you should want it at all."

"I must have missed that train of mine long ago, thanks to these gentlemen," Findlay answered. To sleep in that old bed for eternity! That prospect was far more attractive than were those capsules waiting at the station.

"It's your choice entirely," Bain was saying in his ear. "Free will, you know, old man."

Yet why choose either bed or poison? These chance companions, with their long-faced wit, had cared enough about him to twit him for an hour; somehow they had put heart into him. His cough

seemed to have faded away altogether, and these two friends, and the atmosphere of this old house, were invigorating. He wouldn't swallow those capsules tonight, after all, he decided; perhaps never.

For Marian must not be left to suffer alone, and there were the sensibilities of railway porters to think of. Hyde Park breakfast or no Hyde Park breakfast, something yet might be accomplished in London with somebody or other—given will, given spirit, given grace. Behind this evening's charade there had moved some quickening power, some hint or glimpse of hope. *How* a man dies, and with what justification: this absurd interval of talk had wakened Findlay to awareness of such matters. He would not plunge himself into nothingness without another effort or two.

Canon Hoodman had been watching him closely. "If you feel ready for a bed," the Canon remarked, laying a hand on Findlay's shoulder, "you'll not find a better one than this, Mark. But if you've duties you can't ignore—why, there's always a London train for you."

"No, thanks, gentlemen," Findlay said, "I've miles to go before I sleep."

Bain nodded. "You still have hostages to Fortune, eh? And after all, that bed can be yours whenever you need it. I'll walk you to the corner."

At the front door, Findlay shook hands with the Canon and Marriner. The two of them—if Marriner was privy to the plot—kept up to the last their roguish elaborate pretense. "We'll have more to discuss when you come to us," the Canon told him.

"I don't expect to pass this way again."

"Yet you shall." Findlay and Bain went down the white steps and into the drifting mist; the Canon waved.

That short street, it turned out, was quite as lovely as Findlay had thought it to be, in his glimpses before Bain had drawn him into the Crosskeys. If only he could have lingered to inspect it more closely! Ahead of them, stragglers were hastening through the churchyard and into the lighted church. And that bell tolled on.

"Do you have any idea when the first morning train will leave, Bain?"

"It will be there for you, old man. And all of us at the Crosskeys will be there for you, when you look for us. Ask the cabbie."

Then the bell ceased to toll. Findlay glanced at his watch; it must have stopped in the Crosskeys. He looked backward toward the cathedral tower. Yet surely the cathedral clock, too, had run down, and at the same time, for it stood at half-past eleven.

"Here you are, Mark," Bain was telling him. "Do you make out a cab-rank to the right? Just wave and shout. Wage the good fight, old man."

Sure enough, there was a taxi a few yards distant, on the modern street which intersected this ancient lane. Findlay waved and shouted, and the taxi rolled toward him. "To the station, sir?" the driver was asking now.

"Just a moment. Ralph, you rascal, you've given me a lively evening, though . . ." Findlay turned to face Ralph Bain.

Bain was not to be seen. Nor was the Crosskeys Hotel there—only a vacant site strewn with rubble.

The charming houses of the old street were gone, or at least most of them, and those which survived were ghastly derelicts. That street was wholly lifeless.

Findlay swung back toward the taxi. Beyond it was the church with the Norman tower, or rather the wreck of a church, all dark, no glass in what remained of the window-tracery. The nave was roofless. A mercury-vapor lamp in the modern street glowered over the churchyard, and by it Findlay could make out a metal sign which read: "Public Gardens, Custody of Ministry of Works."

"Station, sir? Time enough to catch the midnight for London. You can hear it coming down from the north now."

Findlay tumbled into the cab. "Tell me—tell me, how long has that street been smashed?"

"Before my time—1941, they say. Them German fire-bombs done for it. Some year, they say, the Corporation'll get round to buildin' council-houses there."

"And what's the name of that street?"

"Saviourgate, sir."